



Western Washington University  
**Western CEDAR**

---

WWU Honors Program Senior Projects

WWU Graduate and Undergraduate Scholarship

---

Winter 2021

## The Mountain and Me: Memories, Expressions, Reflections

Corey Griffis

*Western Washington University*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://cedar.wvu.edu/www\\_honors](https://cedar.wvu.edu/www_honors)



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Griffis, Corey, "The Mountain and Me: Memories, Expressions, Reflections" (2021). *WWU Honors Program Senior Projects*. 431.

[https://cedar.wvu.edu/www\\_honors/431](https://cedar.wvu.edu/www_honors/431)

This Project is brought to you for free and open access by the WWU Graduate and Undergraduate Scholarship at Western CEDAR. It has been accepted for inclusion in WWU Honors Program Senior Projects by an authorized administrator of Western CEDAR. For more information, please contact [westerncedar@wvu.edu](mailto:westerncedar@wvu.edu).

*Note: the following is an adapted excerpt from a much larger, as-yet-unfinished book/memoir project. I began this book project as a Senior Capstone, and it ultimately extended beyond what I could complete before I graduated. I continue to work on this larger memoir; until that time, I have selected the following adapted excerpt for formal submission and archival. This adapted excerpt consists of chronologically separated chapters that are linked by place: together, they describe the important role that my experiences on Mount St. Helens have played in shaping my sense of self and perspective on life and living. The excerpts have been edited and extended in order to function more cohesively as a standalone piece, but they are still, at heart, part of a larger picture that has yet to fully take shape. It is my goal and hope that, sooner rather than later, I will be able to complete that picture and place it here as a more fully-realized creative product.*

# The Mountain

---

On May 18th, 1980, the Cascadian stratovolcano known as Mount St. Helens erupted in what was the strongest, most devastating North American volcanic event in the entirety of the 20th century. The lateral collapse of the north face of the mountain triggered the largest terrestrial landslide in modern world history, killed between fifty-six and sixty-one people, and blanketed a significant portion of the Pacific Northwest in several inches of ash. Plants were suffocated; cars choked; and residents living within the primary path of the ash cloud were advised to stay inside. Enterprising shopkeepers collected buckets full of ash and packaged them for sale to tourists; my grandfather purchased two small jars while visiting Oregon in the years after the eruption, and, following his death, I inherited said jars. One sits in my closet, and another on my desk. The ash is of a peculiar, caky texture, at once sandy and sticky, and I like to occasionally pick one of the jars up and slowly tilt it around — the clump-crack patterns that appear in the ash are quite interesting.

The eruption of Mount St. Helens was, in the frame of deep geologic time, a puny event. It bears no comparison to the ancient flood basalt eruptions that laid out the raw material of much of the Columbia River Basin, nor to the erstwhile cratering of Mount Mazama. In terms of human casualties, it was a far cry from other historical volcanic catastrophes along the Pacific Rim. It did not birth a year without a summer. Yet it was, for its time and place, an unheard-of disaster, in the sense that it popped the bubble of a dormant century for the region's many volcanoes — absent the early-1900s eruptions of Lassen Peak. For many residents of the region and the country at large, the partial collapse of Mount St. Helens was the first indication of the geologic hazards that towered on the horizon — no matter how many tales were told by Indigenous peoples or the accounts of early settler-colonialists, they didn't sink into the popular understanding of the region's relatively mild-mannered landscapes. Meanwhile, for scientists from a diverse array of disciplines, the mountain was a groundbreaking field operation and the eruption a first-hand experience without continental parallel.

In the aftermath of the eruption of Mount St. Helens, the lands surrounding the mountain were passed into the care of the U.S. Forest Service; they have since been designated as a national monument. Over the past several decades, the area has served as a uniquely accessible and temporally convenient example of longitudinal ecological recovery. The vicinity of the mountain is often a site of field research on volcanic soil turnover, post-disaster ecological communities, and processes of ecological succession; such research is conducted by universities, independent researchers, and government agencies.

About five miles by foot from the northern slope of Mount St. Helens is a topographical feature known as Johnston Ridge, formerly known as Coldwater II. Coldwater II was a remote USGS observation station, housed in the humble form of an R.V. trailer; established in early May of 1980, several volcanologists utilized the station as a base camp from which to conduct field work and monitor the mountain's aggravated activity in the weeks before May 18th. The primary data gathered at the station itself was laser-ranging information collected from a series of reflectors which provided measurements of the size and rate of growth of the volcano's cryptodome, a specific variety of lava dome, as it bulged in response to the increasingly forceful intrusion of magma beneath the mountain. Among the numerous volcanologists who frequented the Coldwater II station was David A. Johnston, after whom the ridge was renamed following the eruption.

Johnston was but a young man of thirty, two years removed from doctoral studies, when he began conducting work at Mount St. Helens. Mount St. Helens had been dormant for slightly more than a century, and seismographs were only installed on the mountain as a precautionary measure in 1972. The volcano's slumber came to an end in the latter weeks of March, 1980, when dozens of small tremors began to occur daily underneath the mountain. Johnston was in Seattle when these initial earthquakes were detected, and volunteered to be the geologist of reference for reporters covering the new burst of seismic activity. Within a week, the USGS assigned a team of scientists to monitor volcanic gas emissions on the mountain; Johnston was among them, and assumed an informal leadership role within the group. His colleagues described him as an energetic, genuine, kind-hearted young man, deeply invested in the scientific and human value of the work that they were doing. He was a man of great curiosity and infectious emotional warmth, with a bright future in his chosen field and a dislike of cynicism.

Johnston voluntarily took personal risks in his role with the USGS. Mount St. Helens was an extremely unsafe place at this time; clustered tremors and small, phreatic eruptive events — which released some mixture of ash plumes, steam clouds, and tephra — occurred many times each day. This jumble of activity carved out a primary crater on the summit dome of the mountain; rainwater soon filled the very bottom, forming a small lake. On April 30th, Johnston ventured into this crater and down to that lake, alone and aided only by rock-climbing equipment, in order to collect gas readings and similar measurements that required intimate proximity to the shifting heart of the mountain. As late as the day before the eruption, Johnston spent several hours climbing the newly-formed dacitic cryptodome; this same alpine disfigurement would eventually let loose the lateral eruptive blast. Nonetheless, Johnston scaled the unstable feature in order to gather fumarolic data. He was a firm advocate of the theory that Mount St. Helens was likely to erupt in a lateral blast, which was not accepted by all of his colleagues.

In addition to these efforts, Johnston also put forth particularly vehement requests to state authorities for the closure of the areas surrounding the volcano. Even long-time residents of the region had not yet witnessed any form of major volcanic eruption in the Cascades; many were skeptical of the threat that Mount St. Helens posed, and pushed for the mountain to be reopened for recreational purposes. Some were business owners in the tourism-dependent communities located nearby, and were suffering financially from the closures. Still others were property owners who had homes in the vicinity of the mountain, and wanted to visit or to at least gather their belongings.

Harry R. Truman, the eighty-three year old innkeeper at Spirit Lake, just north of the mountain, became somewhat of a media darling and folk hero during the pre-eruptive period, largely due to his stubborn, cantankerous unwillingness to evacuate. National newspapers profiled him, schoolchildren from the region wrote letters to him, and a number of reporters bypassed police roadblocks in order to have a chance to interview him. He was profiled in *Time* magazine and told highfalutin stories about getting park rangers drunk, stealing gravel from the Forest Service, and throwing a state tax official into the waters of Spirit Lake. He was also an old friend of mean-tempered Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas, who had died in January of 1980 and, (un?)funnily enough, had been passed over in favor of Harry S. Truman as FDR's vice-presidential running mate in 1944.

In line with these eccentricities, Truman, a widower, stated his firm belief that the volcano posed any threat to him or his establishment. He also stated that, even if it did erupt, he would be able to find suitable shelter underneath the ground floor of his inn. It might be that Truman was simply determined to die where he had lived, and was rationalizing this desire through

denial of the dangers upslope — but we cannot ever know with certainty. Willful ignorance and unreliable anecdotal data are powerful things.

While Truman's considerations and decisions were his own, his words were echoed in the public discourse, and many concurred with his dismissive posture towards the possibility of a major eruption and the consequences thereof. Members of the USGS crew were accused by some citizens and journalists of indulging in hyperbole and seeking attention, and some of the area's more colorful characters peddled anti-scientific, anti-government conspiracy theories. Many loggers and recreation-oriented merchants protested road closures, and some of Governor Dixy Lee Ray's political appointees were more interested in appeasing the aforementioned interest groups than they were in listening to the USGS. Manpower ran thin; financial resources were severely crunched; and all the while, tourists both skeptical and ignorant utilized logging trails to bypass the barricades that had been placed on the mountain's primary access roads. Talking about the mountain was necessary in order to convince people to get off of it, but that same attention also drew others to the volcano.

Despite all of these extraneous encumbrances, Johnston and the USGS's lobbying of local and state authorities ensured that only a limited number of individuals were granted temporary access to the slopes within the bounds of the law. By the end of April 1980, Governor Ray issued an executive order imposing a \$1500 fine on anyone who did not have authorization to be in the vicinity of the mountain. To paraphrase Johnston himself, Mount St. Helens was a barrel full of dynamite; the question was not whether the fuse was lit, but how long the fuse ran — and how fast the spark would travel.

However, public discontent was aggravated in the days and weeks immediately preceding the eruption, spurred by news that the mountain had quieted down in mid-May. Indeed, the most readily and widely perceptible forms of eruptive and seismic activity had ceased, but the cryptodome continued to grow at a steady rate of about five feet per day, and the contours of the mountain swelled and contracted. It was as if the volcano was breathing.

Johnston and the rest of the USGS team had the expertise to recognize that the substantive dangers had not subsided, and they insisted that requests by the public continue to be bluntly rebuffed. Their lobbying was mostly successful. On May 17th, a limited number of residents were allowed to visit their properties for part of the day, gather whatever they could carry, and return by nightfall to a safe distance. A second controlled visit was planned for the following day, May 18th, at 10AM. That visit would never occur.

It must be emphasized that, for the brief period within which it was operable, Coldwater II was manned by only a single member of the USGS team; outside of a few multi-person field work ventures onto (or into) the volcano, only one scientist ever needed to be present at Coldwater II in order to record and report the laser-ranging data collected at the station. A geologist named Harry Glicken, then a graduate student at UCSB, had manned the station for several weeks before the eruption; but he had requested leave beginning on May 17th so that he could travel to California and meet with his faculty advisor. Don Swanson, another USGS geologist, was scheduled to take his place, but had another time-sensitive commitment involving a graduate student. Swanson thus asked Johnston to fill in for him at Coldwater II.

Johnston — who was known by some among the USGS crew as 'Captain Midnight' for his willingness to take the, err, *graveyard* shift, — accepted this temporary posting in order to facilitate Glicken and Swanson's respective trips. While every geologist working on Mount St. Helens was cognizant of the precarious nature of the situation, none of them had any particular reason to believe that the volcano would erupt on May 18th. Most of the usual indicators of an impending volcanic eruption — e.g. rapid increases in eruptive and seismic activity;

accelerated bulge movement; ground temperature fluctuations; sudden changes in gas readings — were conspicuously absent.

All of the scientists, Johnston most certainly included, understood that Mount St. Helens would soon erupt, and they understood that Coldwater II would likely be obliterated by a lateral blast eruption. However, there was a general, well-founded consensus that there would be a tenable sort of warning in the form of exacerbated geologic activity; that the USGS team would be able to offer hours, if not days, of advance notice to the public, allowing all remaining personnel within a wide-ranging area to evacuate. While the efforts of Johnston and the rest of the USGS team had ensured that the vast majority of the zone surrounding the mountain had been evacuated, there was uncertainty as to precisely how strong and wide-ranging an eruption might be. There was concern, for instance, that a major eruption would send lahar flows down the North Fork of the Toutle River, which lay to the northwest of the mountain. Such lahars, a superheated slurry of debris and water, would necessitate the abandonment of property many dozens of miles from the volcano itself — but the viability of advance notice would allow minimal disruption at the periphery of potential risk.

On Saturday, May 17th, Johnston and another geologist, Carolyn Driedger, climbed part of the north face of the mountain in order to observe the growth of the cryptodome. Driedger had planned on camping not far from Coldwater II, but Johnston said that he would be alright on his own and told her she could head home. Somewhere around 7PM that day, Harry Glicken departed Coldwater II, leaving Johnston as the sole occupant of the trailer. Before he left for California, Glicken took a single photo of Johnston sitting outside in a camp chair, notebook in hand, looking south towards the northern flank of Mount St. Helens.

Johnston turned to smile at the camera.



*Figure 1. David A. Johnston at Coldwater II, photographed by Harry Glicken about thirteen hours before the May 18th eruption.*

I often think about how genuinely happy he was in that moment, watching the day fade behind the same mountain that would ultimately kill him on the 'morrow.

On Sunday, May 18th, at 8:32 AM, an M-5.1 earthquake occurred directly below the unstable northern slope of Mount St. Helens; within fifteen seconds, the entire north slope began to roll off of the mountain at a speed of ~130 mph. The landslide unceremoniously and immediately exposed the magma in the neck of the volcano to the barometric asymmetry of the atmosphere, resulting in a drastic drop in subterranean pressure, expansion of trapped gases, and a titanic explosion. Mount St. Helens erupted without any advance warning; a lateral blast of superheated pyroclastic material overtook the landslide, and the overlapping flows spread outward to the north of the volcano. Surviving witnesses described the nature of the movement as eerie; less of a collapse than a rippling, as if the summit had turned to liquid.

The massive eruptive release of material from within the mountain lasted somewhere between thirty and forty-five seconds, but the pyroclastic flows, debris avalanches, and the north-slope landslide continued to travel over the landscape for several minutes, engulfing Spirit Lake and barreling for thirteen miles down the North Fork of the Toutle River. The river valley was filled to an average depth of one-hundred-fifty feet with volcanic debris, glacial ice, and displaced water. In the end, the eruption killed somewhere between fifty-six and sixty-one people; only thirty-seven bodies have been recovered. Most of the deaths are attributable to asphyxiation; others died of severe burns, or were crushed under the weight of various forms of volcanic debris. Some barely escaped the blast zone, suffering severe injuries. Keith and Dorothy Stoffel, a pair of geologists, were in a helicopter above the volcano when it erupted, and had to outmaneuver the mushrooming ash plume.

Aside from Johnston, one of the most well-known victims of the eruption was Harry R. Truman, the cantankerous innkeeper, who, in the end, died as perhaps he wished — in the comfort of the home that was the labor of fifty-two years of his life, in the shadow of the mountain that he loved so dearly and yet refused to truly know as the hazard it was. Truman, his lodge, and his sixteen highly unfortunate cats were subsumed by one-hundred and fifty feet of volcanic debris. Although his dismissal of the science of the eruption was unhelpful and not a matter to be celebrated, he was a man who chose, stubbornly, to meet death on his own terms, and that is something worth remembering.

Two photographers, Reid Blackburn and Robert Landsburg, were also killed; Blackburn's body was discovered entombed in his ash-filled car, while Landsburg, in his last moments, took ominous photos of the rapidly approaching eruption, accepted his fate, stowed his camera in his backpack, and used his own body to protect the film for documentary posterity.

Truman, Blackburn, and Landsburg were all killed by pyroclastic flows; they were buried alive in rocky material that burned at heat approaching ~700 degrees Fahrenheit. Truman, because of his lodge's position on the proximal slope of Mount St. Helens, may have been instantaneously vaporized by heat shock.

Johnston, for his part, is the person whose death I think about the most. We cannot ever know with absolutely certainty what his final hours and seconds were like. But we do know that he awoke sometime before 7AM that morning, checked the station's laser-ranging measurements, and saw no anomalies. He radioed those measurements into the USGS operational center in Vancouver, WA, probably made himself breakfast, went outside, sat in his camp chair, and took more notes. Maybe he read a book. He probably looked out at the mountain, deformed but still intact, still partially capped with remnants of that winter's snow. Perhaps he took a leak in the fresh, open air.

Whatever he did that morning, alone up on the ridge, it wasn't spectacular. It was everyday; just a man and a mountain. Another curious human being, somewhere on a long journey to understand something about the world that he lived in.



And in his final moments of life, I wonder, what was happening in the mind and the heart of David A. Johnston? What sights came across his eyes? As best as we can understand, he heard part of the world split asunder; he witnessed a mountain shed a thousand feet of height; he observed an ash plume so vast as to block out the sky; and he saw a wave of earth and superheated gas begin to move rapidly down the mountain, over the North Fork of the Toutle River valley, and towards the ridge where he stood, alone, without any possibility of escape.

The pyroclastic flows that swept Johnston to his death reached Coldwater II in under one minute following the eruption; because of the ridge's close proximity to the volcano, the somewhat elevated topography that he stood upon did nothing to slow down the onslaught. In that single minute, such an infinitesimal moment in time, Johnston gazed with courage and grit out at his impending demise, an embodiment of mortality and loss so unavoidably massive and all-consuming as to defy the conventional scales of human perspective. He accepted that the undeniable end of his life had arrived. Then, we know, Johnston picked up a radio receiver and notified his colleagues at the USGS. "Vancouver! Vancouver!", he said, "This is it!". The line went dead. Those who heard his last words first-hand say that he sounded excited, in utter awe of the volcano, rather than fearful of what the eruption meant for him; colleagues and family members said that he had wanted to see the eruption for himself. I wonder if perhaps he wept at the peculiar, surreal beauty of his own death. Maybe he smiled.

Johnston died mere instants after his transmission was received, and Coldwater II was buried by the earthen material that once made up the northern slope of Mount St. Helens. In the end, the eruption covered twenty-four square miles with some level of debris, eviscerated manmade structures and natural features alike, and flattened two-hundred and thirty square miles of forest. Topographical variances were rendered inconsequential for eight miles in all directions; two-hundred houses were destroyed; and thousands upon thousands of animals were entombed beneath the cascading earth. An ash plume rose from the caldera to reach several miles into the sky; the volcano continued belching for nine hours, primarily spreading debris to the east of the volcano. The eruption blackened the skies in the immediate vicinity of the mountain and deposited some level of significant ashfall across eleven states and three Canadian provinces.

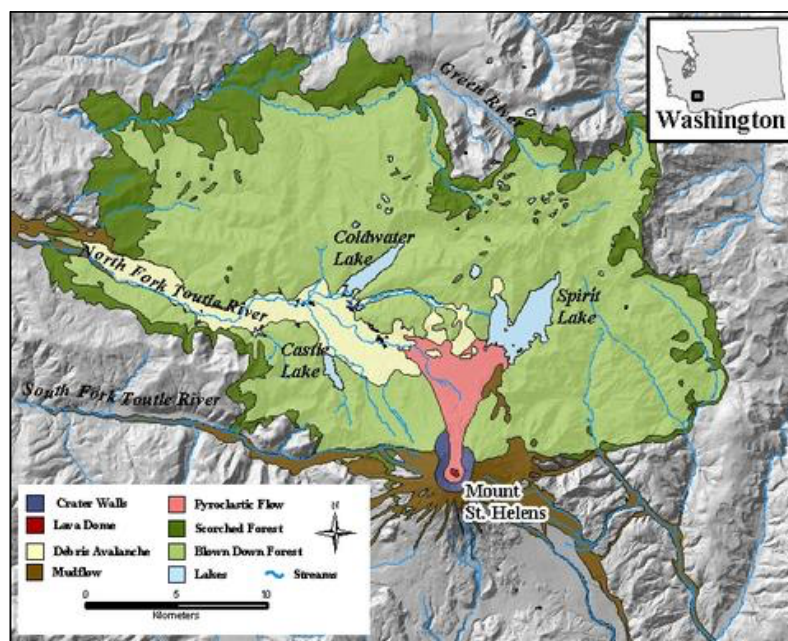


Figure II. Map of varying volcanic outflows and effects created by the eruption; courtesy USGS.



Johnston's actions, and the efforts of the USGS team as whole, saved hundreds, perhaps even thousands of lives, sparing the vast majority of those who made their homes and livelihoods on and below the mountain. How many would have died if the communities neighboring Mount St. Helens had remained unencumbered and nonplussed by the events unfolding on the mountain? How many would have died if the public had still retained full recreational access to the area; if weekend vacationers had been kayaking and fishing on Spirit Lake? What more would have been lost? It is difficult to fathom. In the years following the eruption, the U.S. Forest Service credited public access restrictions with saving between five thousand and ten-thousand lives; concurrently, Governor Ray was criticized for allowing Weyerhaeuser loggers access to a zone at the periphery of the eventual blast zone, a clearance that resulted in the deaths of eleven forestry workers.

Harry Glicken, it should be mentioned, was beset by profound survivor's guilt in regards to Johnston's death. In the days immediately after the eruption, he arranged to be taken on three separate helicopter flights over the blast zone in an attempt to locate Johnston and the trailer, without avail. Glicken died eleven years later, subsumed alongside two foreign colleagues by a pyroclastic flow on Mount Unzen on the island of Kyushu, in Japan; Glicken and Johnston remain the only two American volcanologists to die whilst in the field.

If one drives the road up to Johnston Ridge nowadays, there is a short hike that parallels the topographical saddle. If one turns to the south along that path, one can gaze out at the cratered north face of Mount St. Helens, and the successional landscape laid out between the ridge and the mountain. Logs still clog the waters of Spirit Lake, and the landscape tells many stories. Life on the lower slopes of the mountain is still patchy, fragmented, yet beginning to cohere again; gophers burrow in the ash-filled soil, leaving tilled and fertilized islands where seeds take root and rest after aeolian travels. Elk roam the disturbed open spaces, grazing on what morsels have sprouted from the rubble. The volcano is monitored using various forms of equipment far more advanced than those that were available in the 1980s, and a number of invasive plant species have colonized the landscape. Looking on from near or from far, the mountain seems quiet: but it is not. The land beneath the crater rumbles; the volcano grows; and though the mountain does not live, it is alive. The gears of earthen ages grind, moving at a scale and a pace that is not our lot to see or to hear — except for rumbling snippets and violent glimpses, perhaps, every now and then.

Somewhere beneath the path along the ridge — ensconced within the debris left behind by the collapse of the north face — are the splintered remains of the Coldwater II trailer and young David Johnston. There are at least twenty other unextricated victims like Johnston, scattered throughout the blast zone; their bodies will likely never be recovered. Nor should they be: their tomb, ever-welcoming, is the Earth on which we all walk. Grasses grow green atop the ridge and around the mountain, alongside coniferous saplings, fireweed, purple lupine, shrubs, and a beauteous array of seasonal wildflowers: an organic bouquet that will always be growing, always changing, always renewing, even when the last of us has died and gone unto eternity.

# Of Things Prehistoric and Past

---

When I was a little boy, my parents tell me, I rarely made much of a fuss about anything. I was a rambunctious child, like most folks were at that time in their lives; I was loud and boisterous and curious, oh so curious. But outside of my obstinate refusal to be potty-trained at an early age, I didn't cry or have temper tantrums or complain consistently and persistently. I ate all of my vegetables, especially if green peas were on the menu. My parents have a home video of me on one of my earlier birthdays where I abruptly fall out of the kitchen chair, hit the linoleum floor with a thud, and then pop back up with a toothy smile, saying, "I'm okay!"

My mother and father remember clearly that whenever it was time for me to go to bed, I would happily march to my room, tuck myself under the covers, and zonk out. My head, which was unusually large and somewhat misshapen in my early years, was like a heavy stone that I had carried a long distance, and I laid it down gladly at the end of each day. Only rarely was I beset by nightmares, usually related to vampires; a purple monster from TNT fireworks packaging; or a surrealistic experience wherein I woke up to find that all of my teeth had been replaced by corn kernels. I am still subjected to the latter every now and then, but it is a source of risible amusement rather than pre-adolescent terror.

In the days before I was of age to attend primary school in Redland, I spent most of my time playing on my own, without supervision or an audience. My preferred toys were Matchbox cars, which I kept neatly organized in a plastic case; and dinosaurs, which were scattered everywhere, inside and outside I sometimes chance upon these youthful artifacts when I am doing landscaping work, over a decade after I abandoned them in favor of other things. I've discovered a school bus; a race car; two monkeys from a barrel; a Spinosaurus; and a pair of flimsy cycads. Recently, while rummaging through containers in the garage, I found my favorite figurine: a Safari, Ltd. Brachiosaurus, well-made, fourteen inches tall. I used to pick it up by the neck and spin it around in an imitation of a whirligig. It was very solid and weighed several pounds, so I kept it by my bedside for use as a cudgel against potential burglars. I never had the chance to whack anyone over the head with it.

Up until I was perhaps seven or eight years old, as a result of ongoing improvements to our home and surrounding environs, there was a pile of fill-dirt perpetually situated in one corner of the driveway. To a human being of my pre-adolescent stature, it towered mightily; in reality, it was somewhere around twenty feet wide and ten feet high. My parents utilized the pile for various small projects relating to gardening, construction, and landscaping. I used it for fun. On dry weekends during the spring and summer, my parents would spend most of the day completing tasks outside — weeding, pruning, watering, construction, landscaping — and I would bring out my cars and dinosaurs, walk out to that vast pile of fill-dirt, and proceed to carve roads and topographical features into the soft, pliable mound of earth. I would conduct car chases; mysteries; extinction events; violent confrontations; rescue missions; off-roading adventures. It was a grand old time. My imagination worked at warp-speed: Jurassic Park would be a pitifully predictable production in comparison to the things that I dreamed up.

Often, the dogs would join me. Dallas, one of the two dogs that saw me through most of my formative years, was a pup during this period of my life, and she was especially interested in making a mess of everything I created. It brings me to smile when I remember that as a child, I saw her antics as simply another aspect of play; adults do become so extraordinarily upset when their neatly arrayed plans are trampled upon. Children laugh, pick up the pieces, and start again, as if they somehow understand the inherent entropic principles of existence — or

perhaps it is simply because their ventures have far fewer consequences, and they are unruffled by the setbacks. There is time again for them to build again, and to forget what they have lost.

Regardless, whenever Dallas ran roughshod through a landscape that I had spent a restless hour or two building, I would dismiss my intricate fantasies in favor of wrestling with her while she licked my face. I didn't care if my hair got filthy or mussed up, or if an errant tumble resulted in fill-dirt plugging up my mouth — even though such an accident necessitated copious amounts of dry-heaving. Why would I care? I had no reason to be self-conscious.

I loved to fiddle around with Lincoln Logs, K'nex, and LEGO bricks. My parents bought me new LEGO sets each Christmas, even though I proved to be the sort of child who refused to abide by manufacturer delineations. After building the contents of each box in accord with the construction manual, I dismantled and combined multiple sets together in an unsorted, recalcitrant mess; I preferred to build on a freeform basis, and my masterpiece, a fixture on my desk for close to five years, was a bulky spaceship with about as much color cohesion as a paint splatter.

Later, after my interest in LEGOs waned — somewhere around my thirteenth or fourteenth birthday, I wager — my mother enlisted me to painstakingly separate the contents of my jumbled collection back into their appropriate sets. Many parts were missing; others were difficult to discern between. I stepped on many a LEGO brick, an experience I was not unfamiliar with but which is never anything other than excruciating: thus was the ultimate price of my willy-nilly imagination, suffered in retrospect.

It was totally worth it. I'm not sure my parents ever realized that it was possible to purchase LEGO bricks in bulk or, at least, in generic form, rather than spending money on specific sets. It would certainly have saved them some frustration.

Outside of conventional toys and toy sets, I liked to bike around our property. We were disadvantaged in that we lived in a dell, and the easement was far too steep for any of us to comfortably cycle up; I was not allowed to wheel my bike up to the main road without a chaperone, and so I stayed home. There was decent space to peddle around on the driveway.

At some point, my parents carved a bike trail through some of the woods for me and my brother to enjoy; we also used it as a footpath for accessing the goat pen from the side gate. About halfway down the trail there was a plastic bike ramp, about a foot high at the lip, and this was the reason why I never actually rode my bike down the trail: I was irrationally fearful of grievous injury or a broken bone. I was always content to do wheelies as I rounded the Circle.

In terms of skill, my aptitude was much higher when it came to my kick scooter, a cheap thing with orange handlebars and orange wheels. It folded up, which made it easier to carry — although it was still hefty, considering I was child-sized — and I felt more comfortable on it than I did when mounting a bicycle.

One of these days, I want to get myself an adult-sized kick scooter. I'd happily use it to commute short distances — and for fun.

As a boy, I also loved to pick blueberries and thimbleberries; crouch down in the latticed crawlspace; hide in hollows in the woods; and climb trees. When my parents had to search me out every afternoon for dinner — usually, they rang a metal triangle, which hangs from the eaves of the front porch — they often found me ascending the vine maple on the north side of the house. It was hidden under the shady boughs of an enormous bigleaf maple and leaned downhill, overhanging the edge of the back yard. The primary trunks were large enough for my

small body to stand on, with some effort put into balancing. I recall that my father nailed several spare boards across some of the spaces between the elevated branches; I would spend hours going up, going down, going up, going down; no particular destination in mind. Children are often able to live so effortlessly in the moment.

On occasion, during my climbing of the vine maple, I would imagine that I was running with great agility up the trunks in order to escape some shadowy predator attacking me from behind. I dreamed of being the ruler of the world — and, as a child, I ruled many of my own worlds: the greatest of all inventions. I would pretend that I was surveying some vast and magnificent land full of wondrous creatures and stories. There was a Dilophosaurus crouching behind a Douglas-fir, a herd of Triceratops marching down the slope, a Lambeosaurus drinking from a watering hole, and an extremely unhappy Tyrannosaurus off in the distance, roaring without regard for epochal concurrency.

For most of my early childhood, I wanted to be a paleontologist. When I wasn't traipsing about with fantasies of prehistoric revivification, I was reading about recent discoveries in the field of feathered integuments. I often imagined that I was excavating fossils from the fill-dirt pile, carefully dusting off the fragments and preserving them in plaster of Paris; I ate dino-shaped chicken nuggets from Costco at least once or twice a week, slept underneath dinosaur-print bedsheets while wearing dinosaur-themed pajamas, and read by the glow of a dinosaur nightlight. The walk-in gate path at the end of our driveway was lined with concrete dinosaur footprints, moulded when I was five or six. I carted around various dinosaur figurines in my little red wagon, burying them in gravel or soil in the afternoon and digging them up again before nightfall — or, I forgot about them, in which case my parents often swept up my debris trail.

Every vaguely cranial rock that I found out in the woods just *had* to be the skull of a previously undiscovered genus. Because of my intense interest in fossils, family trips through various parts of the American West usually involved a visit to nearby paleontological sites, and our visits to see my maternal grandparents in Texas were accompanied by a stop to see the (highly inaccurate) life-size models at Dinosaur World in Glen Rose.

In line with my love for dinosaurs, my favorite animated feature was the original production of the Land Before Time. At least several times per week, I would go down to the basement and insert the old VHS tape — it was the only one I didn't ruin by unwinding the film — and I still vividly remember the opening sequence, with columns of bubbles flitting noisily into submersal darkness and a school of Archelon paddling through a shallow sea. I still remember Petri, struggling to learn how to fly; I remember how death befell Littlefoot's mother; and I remember how happy it made me, and makes me still, to see a tree-star falling. I only learned much later in my life of the tragedy in the shadow of the cels: soon after the conclusion of production, ten-year old Judith Barsi, one of the child voice actors, was killed alongside her mother by her alcoholic father in a double murder-suicide.

It is my tendency to be able to enjoy stories regardless of the sins or the sorrow behind the telling, but, all the same, those are aspects to be incorporated into one's understanding of the tale: the origin is an element of the whole, not to be passed over or forgotten. I don't think that we are bound to wholly revise our attachment to things simply because, as time goes by, as we grow older, as we learn to see more and more, and learn to see different angles, different aspects, our conception of things changes: we are always re-remembering, and how something makes us feel may change, but this doesn't mean we need to discard it. The iterations coexist within the nearest among them, never disappearing, never losing relevance, but, rather, becoming part of the story of their own continual becoming. This is true with stories; with art; with memories; with the lives of others — and with my own life.

I am the youngest of two children by a span of six years; me and my older brother, Casey, do not get along in the least. This has almost always been the case; even when I was a boy, we often fought rather disagreeably over using each other's car collections. Casey had a number of toy vehicles which I was fond of, and he also had a play-table out in the garage loft that I was very jealous of. That play-table was covered in fine-grained sawdust from my father's woodworking, and was a fantastic substitute for fill-dirt during the rainy months; I remember competing for the right to possess and utilize my own sawdust.

I tended to be much rougher with my toys than Casey was, and that was a primary point of tension between us. While I am told that my brother was also a rambunctious young'un, he generally became much more careful with how he treated his toy cars when he got older. By the time I was large enough to play with my own vehicles, Casey was analyzing how the wheels on a truck and trailer turn when moved at different angles; he was, it seemed, practicing for being able to back-in a trailer when he was old enough to purchase a flatbed of his own.

Meanwhile, I was body-slamming my father, wrestling with Dallas, and rolling around in a rumpus on the ground. I didn't care if the ground was wet and muddy, or coated with gravel. I just moved as I felt like moving, not paying attention to whether or not said actions were painful to me or to others.

Once, when I was six and my brother was about twelve, Casey shoved his knee into my crotch for borrowing one of his vehicles and using his sawdust table without asking prior permission. I did not appreciate the gesture, and I held a grudge against him for quite some time.

It was also quite frustrating to discover that my parents did not believe me when I tattled on my brother. They were well-aware of the contentious nature of our sibling relationship, but rarely put stock in my complaints — nor in many of my words in general.

I remember an incident when I was twelve and I had gone downstairs after dinner, turned on the T.V., and laid my eyes upon a cable news chyron reporting the assassination of Osama bin Laden. bin Laden was a bogeyman in our household and a common target of pillory in the modern country music that my mother loved so dearly; this rubbed off on me, and so I thought that, surely, there was nothing more purely, straightforwardly evil in all the world. When I saw that chyron on the screen, I immediately ran upstairs, yelling "Osama bin Laden is dead!", and my family scoffed at me and told me to stop lying.

I learned because of this pattern of disbelief, among other tendencies, that I would often not be listened to or taken seriously when I spoke. Thus, as I grew older, I spoke less and less. The outcome seemed likely foregone, and it wasn't worth the hassle to figure out if 'this time' might be different.

Given my lack of any younger siblings, my family's geographical isolation from our relatives in the Southern U.S., and my parent's complete and total lack of any family friends — much less any with young children — I have spent only tiny kernels of time around little ones in my life. The nearest I've come to any such interactions was five or six years ago, when I spent a few hours in the backyard of my grandparents' former home in suburban Bedford, TX, playing with my two baby cousins on a cheap supermarket waterslide. It was an occasion I enjoyed quite a lot, but have never again experienced.

With this in mind, I really cannot make generalizations about how most children spend their time. All that I can say is that I myself was a child consumed in my own wild, unrestrained imagination; I was an independent self-entertainer, fascinated by everything that came unto my sight. I rolled in the earth and splashed in the water; I tangled with branches and thorns; I drank

out of the garden hose, crashed bare-ankle through brambles, and laid my oversized head down whenever I was tired, wherever I was, on whatever surface happened to be available. I did many of the same things that other children did — I ate peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for lunch, hid amidst the circular clothing racks at department stores, and bent my legs forward so that I could chew off my own toenails.

Most kids chew off their toenails at some point, right?

Because of the crystalline nature of these memories, it is all the more bittersweet, then, for me to recall the totality of my childhood. There were some truly idyll years, in the beginning; years without responsibilities or worries, when I ran and I played, and I ran and I played, and I ran and I played — and never did I stop, not even for a day. I explored the world without prejudice or premonition; without expectation. I touched every tree-star and grasped every palmful of soil with recognition of how precious and bright they were; I laughed and I smiled without any reservation. I was, I suppose, innocent, for part of the journey; for the very beginning.

I've never really understood what innocence means, just as a matter of definition.

Some narratives in popular culture and in art portray childhood as a halcyon period of life, painted in bright shades and defined by a lack of complexity; a lack of weight upon the shoulders. Certainly, many folks experience this kind of unperturbed existence for a brief time, and I am no exception — yet childhood is never so straightforward, no matter into what sort of environs a child is born and no matter where and how they are raised. There are always knots; wrinkles; warts. The sordid is not to be ignored, and it need not always be considered sordid in the first place — sometimes, it's just complicated. There are always complications, in childhood as there are throughout one's entire life. An awareness of these complications does not necessitate unhappiness.

I have found that on the far-too-infrequent occasions when people talk about the nuanced context of their childhood, it becomes evident that many folks have taken round advantage of the essential neuroplasticity of their Big Brains and re-remembered their early years as a serene, all-too-levitous slice of their life: a blurred-together cloud, fluffy and unthreatening. It may be that for some this is a personal choice; for others, it is the result of accumulated, unattended forgetfulness. I am sure that many such individuals truly, incontrovertibly believe that their revised memories are real; they have no inkling of what was erased. They have succeeded in exploiting the cardinal rule of memory: that what we pretend to be true will, over time, become indistinguishable from the actual truth.

Others, however, are always marked by a nagging sensation in their headspace, a remnant that reminds them they have forgotten something which cannot easily, if ever, be recovered.

That is how our Big Brains work, after all: unused neural connections decay and are trimmed away to make room for new, more useful patterns of experience and thought; anything not saved will be lost, often forever.

Remembrance is a time-consuming practice; a continuous labor of the heart and mind. It is also a risky endeavor, for one always walks a line between wisdom and worry; between seeking to not forget where one came from, and obsessing about the loss of the smallest details. I know all too well the psychological, temporal disconcertion that one can lapse into while recalling states of mind and being from earlier in one's lifetime. But I have found that the act of conscious, effortful remembrance is an art well worth refining. It is through remembrance and reflection that I can best identify and move on from where I have been, and begin to travel towards wherever it is that I am going next.

Through remembrance, I can see the paths that I have walked. I can see how they intersect and cross and merge with the paths of others; how my own footprints follow or overlap with tracks left by shoes not my own, laid before my time or before my eyes. I can glimpse the moments of meeting and the moments of parting; hear every hello and every goodbye. I can see, off in the distance, where others have come and gone, and smile, in sunshine or in sorrow, towards the horizon — towards the limits of my sight: for despite all of my efforts, I understand and accept that we so often do not notice and cannot notice the way that things change, like the shoreline and the sea.

Through remembrance, I can begin to conceive of how all of the strands are tied together, inextricable, eternal yet ephemeral, collectively relevant yet individually perceived. I can begin to conceive the wholeness of my story and the stories of which I am a part, bit or lead. I can see that there are no beginnings, no endings; only branchings. I can seize control over the narrative of my own life by stitching together the past in a manner that provides buoyancy, rather than inhibition, to the present: for while some experiences are unpleasant by nature, they can become positive in terms of how we integrate them into our sense of self. I cannot change what was, but I have learned, over time, that I can choose not to let it burden or befuddle me: rather, I can bring it with me, into the future, as a reminder: as part of the story.

There are many things to remember, and just as many methods of remembrance; and just as many methods of telling a story; and to each thing and each method their own time, and to each thing and each method their own place.

Sometimes, I remember things that never happened to me.

Other times, I remember things that happened only to me.

And even and especially when it is confusing, frustrating, uncomfortable, embarrassing, and painful, I want to remember, and I want to tell of what I have seen, within and without myself. Our oh-so-human desire to forget conflicts and consternations is exactly what perpetuates them; you have to remember a moment to move on beyond it, and you have to touch something in order to leave it be.

We should not leave our own shadows out of the pictures that we draw, because even if we airbrush them out, they will follow us. They are a part of us; a consequence of living in a world where starlight shines on us by day and by night — a world that reminds us, even if we do not always understand how. I don't believe there is a why.

I also don't believe that human beings ever get over things. They don't ever let go of things, and they don't ever lose things. They don't ever leave anything behind. Whether a person or a place; a tragedy or a comedy; a joy or a sorrow; a love or a hatred: we are always carrying with us all that we have ever known. We might forget that we have it, and we might forget what role it has in who we are; but though that role changes and can be changed, it does not disappear.

If we try, however, to recollect our lives and to remember what we have been through and where we have been — all things concomitant with one another regardless of the distinctions between them, their nature, and the nature of the connections between them — then we can come to amity with our past and live on into our future, better off for remembering and having a more holistic understanding of our experiences.

We are always with; never without. We can often change the weight of things, rendering them heavier or lighter — or at, least, shifting them to a more comfortable point of carriage — but we cannot get over things; let go of things; lose things; leave things behind.



But we can move on; or, move *onwards*. We can cultivate a lightness within our being: not a flippant lightness, not one of detachment and carelessness, but one of perspective, of self-contextualization. I think that Kundera was right about the lightness of being, but not about it being unbearable.

A lot of folks are content to let their memories rest where they are without examination, and many of them are happy with this. Perhaps this suits them. It does not suit me; I find that I am lousy when it comes to compartmentalizing, suppressing, and forgetting — and I do not mean to imply that these words always carry negative connotations.

I do not want to forget where once I was. As I have moved ahead, I have come to a distance where I can no longer see certain things when I turn to look back — but I want to remember the path that I have trodden, and remember what lies out of my sight. I want to visit my memories as dear friends; as reminders; and never conceive of them as enemies, as aberrations to be pushed aside, avoided. All of us have made it through turmoil and travail, and I hold that to remember those parts of my own life and learn of those parts of the lives of others — just as I remember and learn of the joys and the serenities — brings out a greater portion of the beauty of existence. To know what people have gone through brings out the truth of their humanity; their wholeness; and the wholeness of all of which they and I are a part. If we make a concerted point not to see certain things, then we will not ever see anything, not truly, if ever anyone can see things in such a way at all.

It is true that if we try and remember everything, we will remember nothing. It is also true that if we do not try to remember anything, we will forget everything; our memories will become nebulous, leaky pools of blended truth and untruth, vague notions and small snippets with little coherency and little value. Wistful though such memories may be, they are not satisfying.

Things have never been simple, but we rewrite them to be as such. And if there is one thing that I am afraid of in my life, it is forgetting.

I do not want to forget. I will not forget. I will remember.

# The Mountain and Me I

---

In mid-October of 2015, my mother came downstairs to my room one evening and told me that she and my father had decided to travel north to Washington state on the following Friday — a district-wide furlough day — and do something that had long been on their recreational bucket-list: complete the southern approach to the rim of Mount St. Helens.

Normally, I would have lazily declined the invitation to go along with them; I had not yet fully acquired my outsized love for the outdoors, and was not fond of going on day trips with my family. I was a lonely, clinically depressed high school sophomore who spent the overwhelming preponderance of his time in front of a computer or television screen, and I had entirely lost my childhood penchant for going outside and rolling around in dirt piles with the dogs. But, for whatever reason, this time was different: I told my mother that yes, I would go with them.

Friday the 16th rolled around, and we left quite early in the morning. The dogs remained at home: this was a strenuous climb that Dallas and Lakota might not have been able to do in their prime, much less in their old age.

We were on the road for roughly an hour and a half before we arrived at the trailhead at Climber's Bivouac. After we applied sunscreen — or forgot to, in my perennial case — we shouldered our backpacks, went to the bathroom, and analyzed the maps and signage at the base of the scramble leading up the side of the mountain.

Starting up the path, I went first.

The southern approach up to the rim of Mount St. Helens is ten miles out-and-back, somewhere between a hiking trail and a mountaineering route. It begins as a gentle dirt trail, winding with steady elevation gain through an evergreen woodland that obfuscates any view of the looming mountainside. This first section begins at an elevation of about three-thousand five-hundred feet and climbs just over one-thousand feet over about two miles; the farther up the slope one goes, the sparser the canopy and tree cover becomes. Sunshine begins to flit with regularity through the branches; windthrow and pyroclastic debris becomes more common; and even the fir trees still standing are damaged, with lower trunks barren of branches and upper crowns cracked and strewn to the ground.

Shortly after crossing Swift Creek, a seasonal alpine flow, the trail exits gradually up onto a steep, rocky incline. There are no trees above four-thousand eight-hundred feet, and very little in the way of brush and other hardy forms of plant life. One can look behind and see expanses of scree, forested hills, and Mount Adams out to the east; if one looks ahead, however there is only stony mountainside. In order to glimpse the path ahead, one must crane their head upwards; after a time, this becomes tiring and stresses the joints in the neck. The trail itself is gravelly and not conducive to barefootedness, unlike the lower portions.

After exiting onto open, sun-scorched terrain, the trail remains relatively well-defined for a short time. Soon, however, the gravelly contours blur and fade, ceding way to a bouldered ridge. To hike this portion of the trail is to walk with infinite variability along that ridge, stepping onto and around basaltic stones of many sizes and shapes; some black, some gray, some muddy, some ruddy. It is inevitable that even the most limber of folks will stumble every now and then, their lungs gasping even with regular breaks and plenty of water. Elevation gain hastens.

At close to six thousand two-hundred feet, one approaches what I call the Steps. These are tiered accumulations of volcanic debris and talus, each piece large enough to crush a man if it were to begin rolling down the mountain. The trail, marked only by a few irregular and not always obvious posts stuck into the ground between boulders, climbs perhaps one hundred feet upwards on each Step; one has to delicately and slowly place one's feet from one rock to another, careful not to put weight on any that are unstable. The way is very hard on the knees, and each Step levels out for only a short distance before giving way to the next Step. There are two or three weather instruments positioned intermittently on these level portions, usually at the very top of each upward debris field. Frequent moments of rest are required. It is like ascending a wedding cake from Hell.

In terms of strict distance and elevation gain, the Steps are a small portion of the trail. They are, however, very time-consuming, and seemingly have no end. In time, however, one will reach the top of the last of them, and find before them a steadier, again gravelly slope, barren and with only occasional pieces of large debris. Focused on the trail ahead, it resembles a moonscape, pockmarked, gray, and unyielding. This portion of the trail begins at around seven-thousand feet and continues up for about seven or eight hundred feet of elevation gain; even in mid-July, small sections of seasonal snowfall remain intact along the trail.

Around two-hundred feet below the edge of the caldera rim, the final section of the trail emerges: a slog through fine-grained sand. For each foot forward, the sand pulls you half a foot backwards; it is akin to walking up the shifting surface of a dune by the shores of the sea.

On that day, climbing Mount St. Helens, I was in sorrow. As we progressed further up the mountain, I strayed far from my mother and father and the other hikers that had begun their ascent soon after us. With haste, the sun burned my skin — which, as is per typical, I had neglected to coat with proper SPF. Every part of my body ached and my lungs burned; I was out of shape and had not brought enough water along for the journey. The wind rattled my clothes and absolutely butchered my hair — and I had forgotten to bring a beanie.

On my way up the mountain, I began thinking about a lot of things in my life. I thought about how unhappy I was; about how solitude, even though it was all I had ever known, proved a source of profound dissatisfaction. I thought about how consistently disengaged I was from activities that I had once enjoyed, and thought about how my isolation had only solidified with the reconvening of the new school year. It felt like no matter what I did — no matter my efforts, my patience, my thoughts and reflections — I had not moved an inch in terms of substantive reality. I was a different person by all experiential accounts, and yet I felt very much the same. Stagnation took a toll. Vulnerability had earned me nothing. I could see a better way; a better life; but it was out of reach. It was not that I hated the world: it was that I did not understand either how to love it while being alone, nor how to love it alongside others. I wanted to understand, but I could not.

The Steps presented me with thoughts of eternal gradations; of the illusion of progress, broken by brief respites that were always defined by the next hard climb ahead; a climb not fulfilling in and of itself. Would this be the end of my prolonged ascent? At last, would I be able to rest and settle myself down on the ground? Would I drink generously of all the bounties of life of which I had not yet taken part? Would this be the final Step?

No.

As I approached the rim, every step forward brought my body higher in the world, but this clambering was internally mirrored by a sunken, slumping descent. I was tired and weary, through and through, like a feather slowly falling by the sole grace of gravity. Days came and went only because that is what days do, not because of any usefulness or action of my own. I

felt stripped bare, and I had lost even the thought of everything I'd never had. I dwelled on the absence of things, in ennui, and I did not yet understand the virtues of emptiness.

And as I summited the rim, I walked alongside the perimeter of the caldera and looked out upon the world; and felt like I did not deserve to stand at such a height. A crater opened in my stomach, and, free of existential ballast, I calmly looked around. There was no one in the vicinity, and my parents were still a two or three hundred feet below. I was out of their sight.

I wanted to be out of my own sight.

I squirmed until my backpack came off of my shoulders, and stepped up to the edge of the caldera. I felt the emptiness of the space below me, and I wondered how quickly death might come to a person if they were to wittingly splinter themselves on a boulder.

For some time, the notion of suicide had crossed my mind on a regular basis; a passing breeze, nothing more, yet I opened the door wide enough for a draft to come in and flutter the papers on the kitchen table. The prospect hadn't yet ever aroused much in me in the way of substantive contemplation — more than anything, I had thought about suicide as a concept, not an action to be taken. It was akin to driftwood on the surface of my mind: of shape but without weight. Like flotsam, suicide was an idea that broke the tension of the restless waves; it was tossed about in the water and was occasionally thrust deeper into the fluidity of my being, but did not sink to rest at the base.

Suicide had no vividity to me, back then. It was an object in the distance, fuzzy and blurry but vaguely distinguishable. No one that I knew of in my life had offed themselves, and I was familiar with the idea primarily through the annals of literature, music, and cinema. Camus posed it as a question at the heart of life's absurdity; Kawabata and Mishima wrote of honorable *seppuku*; Sofia Coppola directed *The Virgin Suicides* and Kobayashi told a story of *Harakiri*. Nick Drake, whose voice was so soft that it could not penetrate anyone's heart — only flow into it like air into the lungs — died of his own volition. Ian Curtis, 23, hung himself on a clothesline. We will never know how many figures of the counterculture overdosed deliberately.

As a concept, suicide was comforting: it presented a terminus, a nadir. When my thoughts broached the subject, I knew that I could go no lower, and I became much more calm; my feelings less harried. Simply reaching a point where suicide entered my mind resulted in the evaporation of the worst of my emotions. It allowed me to weep, exhaust myself, and drift off to sleep.

The idea of committing suicide was just a passing bird. It might be said that sometimes, I took a great notion to jump in the river and drown — but in the end, I just thought it too much of a bother and went to sleep before traveling down to the bank.

Things were funny like that — and then they weren't.

Folks often speak of and write about what supposedly happens in the moments before a person dies. The traditional narrative is that a person's entire life appears to them in headlong fashion, miraculously compressed into an elongated interstice of briefest time. A bevy of psychological and neuroscientific research reinforces this perception; the general consensus is that such flashes occur to many people, but are not by any means universal.

My hope was that jumping off of the rim might spare me such visions. With the chilling rush of my body falling through the upper air, I fancied that I might be distracted by physical sensation

during my time as a gravitationally supported entity in free flight, a living ragdoll without a parachute.

All things considered, Mount St. Helens would have been a piss-poor choice of place to commit suicide. I was not desirous of torture, and the gradual concave contours of the crater would likely have facilitated a painful, lengthy tumble, full of scrapes and kinks and bashing and crashing and, eventually, either a precipitous fall or a merciful neck-snapping. Furthermore, it did occur to me that in a three-hundred foot fall, the first two-hundred and ninety-eight feet would be exhilarating; the last two feet to the pulverizing ground, not so much.

Then again, that's the double-edged purpose of falling from a great height: you get squashed like an overripe pumpkin.

Although subsumed in despair, my mind was dutiful and calculative: suicide seemed an entirely rational option. There was enough scattered debris and enough vertical space to make the trip painless; being impaled would be instantaneous, and I was quite confident I could fling myself forward and maneuver to land on a suitably backbreaking fragment of the mountain. It would be like scuttling a derelict ship amidst treacherous shoals: I might not be able to beach my vessel on a particular bar, but any old spot would do just fine.

I lifted my left foot several inches off of the ground and moved it forward, not stepping, not yet, but just keeping it aloft in the air. At least three-hundred feet of atmosphere lay between the sole of my shoe and the nearest side of the crater. The hole in my stomach widened, a sinkhole that spanned the entirety of my internal world.

In the moment that the hole in my stomach widened within me, I heard the wind. It seemed like the loudest sound that ever my ears had known.

But the hole had widened way long down a tad too far. It allowed me too great a peek at what lay below and beyond the end of my being; I could no longer entertain the thought of jumping suicidally into the void while also turning my eyes away from the emptiness. Light and life shone onto the yawning vastness of the gulf where being should have been, and the gulf swallowed every ray — a prism in paradoxical reverse, taking in all shades of color and emitting only vacuity, only darkness. Ignorance and denial were impossible.

Prior to that day, there had been several occasions in my life when I came close to my own death. Most folks experienced many such moments, even if they were unaware at the time of the happening(s) or choose not to remember them.

In my own case, there was one obvious, personal event: the time Dalton pushed me headfirst onto the fork-latch at Casey's baseball tournament. Then, there were the more subtle, benign moments, not always impactful and rarely vivid in memorability. Everyone has their close calls; it's just that most folks ignore them and forget about them. They are wisps of experience, lost in time. Choosing to really think about them is what does a person good and provides some measure of perspective.

A good chunk of these moments involve motor vehicles: lane-changes or swerves that almost result in a fatal accident on the freeway; a passing deer that barely misses the front windshield; a reckless driver who is too speedy, hasn't turned on their highlights, and so forth. Other moments involve stumbles that almost send one's head falling onto brick or stone or asphalt, which, at the very least, would result in a nasty trip to the ER.

These are the sort of moments that most every person will experience at some point in their life. They are times when one briefly feels the fragility of human life emerge as visceral

knowledge in one's consciousness; then, the feeling fades away. I imagine it is the same fleeting existential dread a fly must feel when it momentarily becomes stuck on the tense surface of a pond, spots a trout hiding below, lying in wait amidst riparian grasses, and manages to dislodge itself and wing away before the fish can react.

What I experienced when I stood with my foot hovering above the crater of Mount St. Helens was an altogether different sort of dread. Dread, after all, only begins as a small feeling, barely audible, hardly notable — like the echoing splash of a pebble as it plops in the water at the bottom of a well. But like a reverberation, dread can grow and balloon very, very fast; it is one of many emotions that can at times resemble a frightened pufferfish.

Death is a central thematic crucible in human artistic expression and storytelling. It is also something that most folks are squeamish about and do not like to discuss; they may be revolted by the material reality of death, sorrowed by the emotional affects of death in their own life, or uncomfortable venturing into spiritual and philosophical debates on death and the prospective existence or absence of an after-death. However, when folks do discuss death, their anxieties and fears tend to center around worries about living a fulfilling life in preparation for a good death; concerns about how painful the process of dying and the happening of death are; and a lack of certainty regarding whether or not there is a graceful, peaceful after-death, including doubts about whether or not they themselves will experience it.

On the rim of the mountain, these worries did not occur to me. In that moment I loathed myself and there was no contemplative question within me that I would die as a profoundly unhappy unfulfilled human being. There would be no post-mortem salvation, nor torment: only absolute unknowing. My foot posed above air, my mind drifted smoothly towards the prospect of existential cessation, and I became viscerally conscious of my death to come — and I figured that whatever excruciating pain I might feel by dashing myself on the rocks would be offset by the blessed oblivion of a quickened end.

Forever is both the longest and the shortest of frames; long because we never see the end, and short because we never see the beginning. It is not our lot. Our lot is to be always unknowing of forever. Eternity is only ever over before it begins.

All of my fears circulated and came to boil around the singular notion of permanent, final terminability. I stood upon the cusp of un-being, gazing down at volcanic stone and rim-cast shadows. Inside of my mind, the consumptive abyss was unitary and undisturbed; it might have been bottomless, a space through which one would fall forever; it might have been a pit, miles deep; it might have been a step inset only an inch below the edge. Outside of my mind, there was no epistemological abyss. There was only obvious material reality. That reality was rocky, cold, and unforgiving. It was final.

I really cannot say what happened to me in the moments that followed. I have wracked my memories, attempting to reasonably articulate the complex texture of what I experienced; it was an experience of primeval fear, yes, but it was more protean than terror alone. I felt lonelier and more disjointed than ever I had felt before, and yet something inscrutable inside of me would not permit suicide. Something held me back from stepping off the rim — and if I wished, I could spend the entirety of my life searching for it, trying to grasp at every minute strand of emotion in hopes of a name or an answer. But there would be little point.

I stepped back from the rim of the crater and placed my left foot firmly on the ground, lifting and re-grounding it several times to reassure myself that yes, this was what I wanted, because it didn't quite seem to me that trading death for misery was a good deal. My eyes were wet with tears, and my nose was ruddy and runny from the chill of alpine wind rushing over the summit. I heard people coming up the sandy slope just beneath the lip of the rim, and I turned:

my parents had caught up with me, my mother with her hiking poles and my father with his baseball cap, covering his bald pate.

For the first time in a long while, I was somewhat happy to see them — their presence meant I could not reconsider my decision not to jump . They came up the rise only half a minute or so after I had stepped back from the edge, and it brings me to weep when I understand that though I was standing only one or two feet from the precipice, they hadn't the slightest notion of what I had almost done.

We remained up top for a while; probably ten minutes or so. At my mother's request, I posed for a photograph; I was wearing sunglasses and the wind had reddened my face, so it is impossible to tell that I had been weeping. I have never liked to have others take my picture, as I prefer different methods of remembrance. I do not need a photograph to prove that I did something or ventured somewhere; instead, I would rather tell a story — or return to a place, or do again what I have not done for a long, long time. While I am happy to take photographs of landscapes and other outward things, I see little need to insert myself into the frame; the point is not to be seen somewhere or with someone, but to introduce places and people to others: and to remember for one's own good health.

But it is alright, I suppose, to have a photograph of oneself at certain moments, with certain people. Just a few, every now and then.

The trek down the mountain was far less physically arduous than the ascent, and it took comparatively little time to complete. My knees underwent a beating on the Steps and I began to suffer from the sunburns I had sustained on the upward journey, but, otherwise, I was preoccupied with befuddlement at what had just happened to me.

I arrived at the trailhead about fifteen minutes ahead of my parents, and sat down on a log to rest my aching joints. Eventually, my father came out into the clearing at the start of the trail, followed shortly thereafter by my mother. We filed over to our Subaru, tossed our gear into the relevant spaces, and climbed inside. I took off my shoes and socks, applied aloe vera to my extremely irritated skin, took a very long swig of water from the canteen in the backseat, and relaxed into the cushions.

We didn't talk much on the drive back home. My mother asked me if I enjoyed the hike, and I mumbled "sure".

I was lying.



# Pizza, Reflected

---

I wish I could say that my ascent of Mount St. Helens was a point of turn. I wish I could say that having backed down from hurling myself off of the rim of a dormant volcano indicated the end of the worst of my experiences; that it represented a definite landmark of hopefulness; that my inability to kill myself on one occasion precluded my trying again on a second occasion.

Alas, while my first ascent of Mount St. Helens has proved an invaluable point of reference and reflection, it was not a point of turn. Suffice it to say that I remained just as miserable afterwards as I had been before; I continued to descend to further emotional lows, and there were moments when I cruelly burdened myself by attributing my continued status as a living human being to inherent personal weakness.

The story of how I slowly emerged from clinical depression and stumbled towards a *joie de vivre* is one too long for this occasion, and it is one I have not yet finished remembering, re-creating, crafting. Suffice it to say that the story involves a second failed suicide attempt; half-a-dozen patient and compassionate teachers; a twenty-three year old Toyota Camry that I inherited from my maternal grandfather; a family vacation pit-stop at the Kootenay National Wildlife Refuge in Idaho; lots of music, many films, many television shows, and large numbers of books; and the commencement of a steady, unending awakening to the vast, complex materiality of biotic and abiotic existence.

By the conclusion of my junior year of high school, I was happy for the first time in memory. Not momentarily happy; not stable; not 'fine'. Genuinely, thoroughly, consistently happy. I had bad days, and I knew I always would. I regularly got into arguments with my mother; still longed for friendship; was uncertain as to what I wanted to do with my life; and occasionally lapsed into brief depressive episodes or experienced intense nervous breakdowns, including at school. But none of those things rendered me unable to generally function and enjoy life. They were inconsequential blips on the radar, occurring once in a blue moon. Rather than stultify me, those moments served as reminders of how far I had come; instead of perpetuating themselves as a continual state of being, those moments became memories.

My final essay for AP Lang was assigned as a revisitation of the essay we had written for summer homework in 2016, prior to the beginning of the course. That essay was about what it meant to be an American, and my original draft was choppy, uncentered, and simplistic. Given the task of revisiting the same question, I discarded what I had written over the summer. I binned it, and did not look back.

Instead, I wrote a doubled-spaced, twenty-three page essay entitled 'Around the Same Star', focused on a very personalistic interpretation of the assignment. It was ten pages beyond the required length, but there was no strict allotment, only a suggestion. I judged that I could safely exceed the suggested length provided that the quality of my work was sufficient, and I tentatively felt at the time that such an exception could be made. I had worked feverishly on the paper, completing most of it in one sitting; the words had flowed naturally, fluidly. I could not trim the paper much at all without simply rewriting it, whereupon I would end up losing the essence of the argument I wished to convey. Concision, concision; decisions, decisions.

The length was genuinely an accident; I was not the sort to flout the parameters of an assignment. I didn't think myself good enough for such flippant disregard. In fact, I remember being particularly anxious when final Lang essays were handed back with grades, partially

because that would determine my final mark for the class but primarily because I was not confident my efforts had born good fruit. I expected disappointment, from outside and within.

At that time, my perception of my own writing was far too dependent on grades; I wrote very few pieces not intended to function as a class assignment.

To my relief and utter surprise, 'Around the Same Star' was the subject of the most flattering compliment that Mr. Kline gave me in reference to a piece of my Lang writing: he told me that he was reading a section of the paper aloud while grading and was overheard by his wife, another teacher, who asked what book he was reading from.

Reviewing the paper nowadays, parts of it rub off as too soaring in their language; perhaps too confident, with little of the intentional, principled ambiguity that now frequents much of my argumentative writing. While it is not reductionistic, the paper does make certain overly broad assertions and exhibits some degree of selective evidence use. These flaws are somewhat a product of my then-unrefined idealism, and somewhat a product of the parameters of the essay, which was meant to utilize academic sources. The ideas I was writing about would probably have been better shaped into a more explorative, philosophical essay, focusing explicitly on my personal convictions rather than attempting meld together evidentiary examination with broad pondering.

I began the paper with an anecdotal commentary on the moment in which I began to think about what my own personalistic definition of what it meant to be an American:

[...] I focused on the physical aspects of the world at that exact moment, and I let them — through a process undefined — guide my mind towards some other topic of contemplation.

It happened that that particular evening, no matter how odd it might be for me to say, led me to discredit the concept of sunrises and sunsets. After all, no matter how beautiful and inspirational be the idea that the sun rises and sets around the Earth, it is the Copernican rotation of our own soiled haven around the sun that leads to the cyclicity of day and night. The sun does not rise about us all — the Earth turns to face it; and the sun does not set beneath the horizon — the Earth turns away from it. And with the turn of the Earth, so do we ourselves — as individuals and as societies — turn to become awash in light, or to become shielded from it.

A bit grandiose, but one of the first instances of my proclivity for picking apart various linguistic peculiarities; the idea of sunrises and sunsets implies a horizontal perspective, where a person looks out at the limits of their sight and sees the sun 'set' below the curve of the Earth or 'rise' above the curve of the Earth. In reality, it is the Earth that moves, not the sun; there is a new font of symbolism in this reorientation.

I like tweaking these sorts of small things; I still utilize the ingrained language, but, to proffer another example, I love to remind myself that when I look outside after a night of snowfall, I am not simply seeing frozen flakes of water. At a chemical level, snowflakes are crystals. Thus, we live in a world where crystals fall from the sky; cover streets with cold clouds between the blocks; weight down trees; and drift slowly down into the mouth of a playful child, sticking their tongue out to catch an artwork etched in icy miniature.

In 'Around the Same Star', I focused on examining my cosmopolitan identity and reconciling it with simultaneously being and identifying as an American. Looking up at the sky one evening, I started thinking about unity and diversity, and eventually began to think of all of the different reasons why people are different from one another and identify with distinct groups.

I wrote what is probably one of the more durable aphorisms that sprang to me at that age:

We are all different in the same ways.

However, as we become different — as we come to search for the same fundamental things in different places, and in different ways — we fail to discover and remember this exact commonality of differences. Even if we understand it at a logical level, it rarely suffuses us at a deeper level; the conceptual unity of humanity is not something that fundamentally guides most of us in terms of how we conduct our life and interpret our world.

What follows for the remainder of the paper is a discussion of nationality; nationhood; citizenship; and other such concepts, acknowledging their importance while investigating the ways in which they often divide us at crucial junctures. Most interestingly to me now, I discussed research done in China by Talhelm et al. in regards to psychological asymmetry between rice farmers and non-rice farmers, as well as subsequent critiques by Hu and Yuan; this research was aimed at discussing environmental influences on individualist and collectivist mindsets. It has value, but has been misconstrued in academia by hardcore environmental determinists to make arguments à la Jared Diamond that ignore or severely downplay the historical importance of sociocultural and moral choices.

The essay ends with a pronouncement on my part of a highly idealistic hope for humanity's ability to overcome our fear of one another and extricate ourselves from a zero-sum perspective wherein the world as always to be at odds with itself. I acknowledged the complications of gross global inequality, particularly insofar as they force a great many human beings to make choices that, wittingly or unwittingly, negatively impact others in order to ensure their own survival, dignity, and maintenance of basic comforts.

Then, I wrote:

Things will be lost, yes, but things will be gained that shall become much dearer to our hearts. It will take courage and travail, and errors will occur that lead to tragic costs — such is the nature of human achievement. And yet do we not owe ourselves — and all of those human beings who have wished and fought for something better — the continuation of this mission in modern times?

I am happy that even back then, I understood that global changes are never successfully completed without many mistakes and many losses. My idealism was tempered.

I concluded the paper by exalting various human accomplishments: flying; domestication of animals and plants; the codification of the genome; the eradication of smallpox; and the invention of electricity. Finally:

Our fate is set securely within our own hands, and it is time we take responsibility for it — if ever we wish to continue to live on the terrestrial ark that is the planet; this planet which, in its rotation, circulates us all towards and against the sun; this planet which circulates us all — in joy, in sorrow; in life, in love; in hate, in despair, and in hope — around the same star.

I can trace some of the central convictions of my life intimately back to that conclusive paragraph. It reflects a sense of cosmopolitan unity in diversity and fearless idealism, rooted not in ignorance or naïveté but in the conviction that it is, in practical terms, useless to be cynical. Seeing things realistically, even when that realism renders unto our eyes sights of tragedy and despair, is not incompatible with hopefulness.

I see in those pages that by the end of my junior year, I had an expansive perspective on what it meant to exist as an individual amidst a broader humanity; a burgeoning sense of ecological stewardship; and a comprehension of the concomitancy of joy and sorrow, both but ebbs and flows upon the shores of the seas of life — it is simply that we can sometimes be caught in the tide. Those pages nourished the first shoots of a reverential materialism that would mineralize as the lodestone of my spirituality and, indeed, as one of the core facets of my life philosophy.

Sometime in the final few weeks of my junior year, right before we turned in our final Lang papers, we were each assigned a partner for peer review. I do not remember who my partner was, nor what they wrote, nor what they said about my paper.

I do remember that a gal named Ana, a year younger than me, asked me separately to review her paper. I hadn't spoken to her at all except in passing, although I had read one of her earlier Lang essays in my capacity as an editor of the OCHS Literary Magazine. All that I really knew about Ana was that she was a good student and came from a religious background. She spent time around some folks who I liked; some who I was not fond of. In general, she was quiet, unassuming, and articulate on the infrequent occasions when she spoke in class. I was happy to exchange and review papers with her; no one had ever asked me to help them in such a capacity before.

We met after school in the cafeteria, which was mostly deserted after the final bell. I do not recall what Ana wrote about. What I do remember is that she was impressed with my paper, a memory that she has corroborated. Ana has also told me that her motivation for seeking out my advice was triplicate, the first reason being that she knew about my work on the high school's literary magazine; the second reason being that she believed I would provide honest feedback; and the third reason being that after asking Mr. Kline who to seek out for a second eye, he suggested me.

Ana would become a very dear friend to me come the following spring, and in seasons beyond.

My junior year, however, concluded without the formation of any lasting friendships with my peers. I had adjusted well to solitude, and, while my social desires remained strong, I had crafted cognitive and experiential tools to manage loneliness. Those tools comprised a skeleton crew compared to what I now have, but they were far more than I had ever before known.

Sometimes, I wonder whether or not most folks have a similar set of tools, not in terms of essence but in terms of purposiveness. A great deal of effort must be expended to acquire the language and introspective framework necessary to freely and critically consider such intimate, intricate matters, and, even then, to share them with others one must be open, vulnerable, and unbothered to a degree that must be consciously angled towards. My own lack of hard conversational boundaries is something that I have taught myself over time; it did not come smoothly or spontaneously, and I do not think such openness can ever cohere naturally.

Vulnerability can come in the form of sharing weight, it is true, but I find that it more often manifests in my own life when existential burdens acquire (or reveal) buoyant properties. I carry many things with me, but, at any given moment, very few of them seem so heavy as once they were or might possibly become. One must travel a lumpy, bumpy road in order to arrive at such openness, so much shaken up from the dips and ditches that the journey has left one with a pervasive lightness of being — but not such an unbearable lightness, in truth.

One of the sayings that I sometimes repeat to myself is a homespun aphorism that came to me courtesy of Mr. Kline. As a young undergraduate at the University of Denver (and later UC Davis), he had a part-time job delivering pizza. One day, he was unusually late for a delivery because of gridlocked traffic, and, by the time he got to his destination, the pizza was cold.

Nonetheless, he rang the doorbell. An old woman came out to meet him, and he began profusely apologizing to her for being so tardy. He was very anxious about the situation, as he was worried she would ask for a discount and word would get back to his manager.

After he finished talking, the old woman smiled and told him, "It's okay. It's just a pizza."

So, every now and then, I tell myself, "It's just a pizza."

Of course, Mr. Kline ended his anecdotal retelling by mentioning that everything changed when he married and began raising a child. Then, it was no longer just a pizza.

On my very last day of Lang, I stayed behind after class to chat with Mr. Kline and thank him for all that he had given to and shared with me over the academic year. He had hall monitor duties that afternoon, so we filed downstairs into the school lobby and talked for a short while, students milling about and murmuring all around us.

Grappling with the breadth and depth of my ongoing personal revitalization, I wanted to ask a question of the person who probably knew me best back then, through having parsed and discussed dozens of pages of thoughts and argumentation.

Nervously, and so earnestly, I asked: "What do you think of me?"

Mr. Kline said that I was a good-hearted young man with a bright future, and that I would find my way. He thought the question was a bit odd, and his answer was delivered with a cordial curtness that I sometimes struggled not to overanalyze or cast with umbral shade.

Wrapped up in my urge to ask that question of Mr. Kline was a desire for validation. Regardless of how confidently I then spoke or wrote about various personal experiences, I was tepid in my self-conception. I was still dipping my feet into ontological waters, and I was not yet fully assured of certain core aspects of who I was and wanted to become. I was searching for people who would reflect back to me what I wanted to see in myself; proof that my labors had born fruit, and that I was simultaneously embodying and presenting a more self-actualized iteration of my being.

There is a song that comes to me. It is from back in 1967, when Andy Warhol's in-house band, the Velvet Underground, produced an eleven-track record with the German singer Nico, entitled *The Velvet Underground & Nico*. The album's songs were highly experimental and discordant, addressing taboo themes such as drug abuse, prostitution, and sadomasochism.

I love the entire record.

Track 9, however, sticks out among the others as a song both light and heavy; beautiful in being at once genuine and fragile. Sung by Nico and accompanied by instrumentation both uplifting and gentle, it is called "I'll Be Your Mirror."

I often sang part of it in the shower:

*"I'll be your mirror,  
reflect what you are,  
in case you don't know.  
I'll be the wind, the rain and the sunset  
The light on your door  
to show that you're home.*

*When you think the night has seen your mind,  
that inside you're twisted and unkind,  
let me stand to show that you are blind.  
Please put down your hands,  
'cause I see you."*

No longer did the night see my mind — yet it would be some time before I dared believe this. My teachers, who told me what limited truths they could, were slivers and shards of solace, seen here and there; but I was my only mirror: and I still saw, reflected in the corners of the glass, the abyss that stares back.

It seemed distant, though; like thunder on the farthest horizon, moving away.

# Summer Self-Reflections

---

In the waning days of August of 2018, after most folks from Oregon City had left for university, I found myself with few commitments — a spot of lingering preparation for my own imminent departure to Western, but, otherwise, blue skies. I spent quite a lot of time at home with the dogs, cognizant of the possibility that Lakota's ailing health would make those days my last opportunity to be with her. I compiled a freshman year bucket-list; worked on some of my hobbyist cartography; and sat out on the front porch swing on warmer afternoons and read books. I went for a solo walk or two at Chapin Park, uncertain of what now lay ahead in terms of the novel friendships I had endeavored so hard to develop and strengthen over the summer.

It was a slow time, and, more than usual, I had space to ruminate. It is very easy in life to get bogged down in the perpetuity of happenings and happenstance; to move immediately from one point of focus to another, stopping to perhaps take a short breather but, for the most part, go right on walking. Time marches on, and so do people. But it is also healthy to periodically stop and look around, and realize where you are — to admire and appreciate the beautiful particularity of the presence and passage of certain moments or modes of being in one's life, especially those that happen but once and never come again. Beginning with my high school graduation, I made a conscious effort to relish in the complexities of such unique, inimitable strands of time; to sort through the intricate thoughts and emotions that they engendered within me, and seal in amber at least a small portion of my contemporaneous perspective. I wanted to remember.

This sort of lengthy self-reflection represented an extension of my broader habit of 'practicing' thought and emotion, not in the manner that one attempts to ride a tricycle for the first time but in the manner that one might labor to cultivate a garden. By allowing myself to react to myriad stimuli with minimal pre-conceptual discrimination as to which were worth addressing and which not, I shifted into a state of lightness: the contours of my mind and heart swirled, fluid, contained yet accepting of their own permutation. I opened, and let time and time pass by and through me; I found myself traveling across self and space, grappling with thoughts and emotions both familiar and unfamiliar; with memories, expressions, reflections. Some of them called out to be plucked and planted; others became meaningful by virtue of their transience. This was a deliberate practice that I engaged in, on a regular, often everyday basis. It grounded me.

Close to the end of August, I got to thinking about where I was in life; where I was going; where I had been. It was a time of transition, which is always gradual but nonetheless manages to frequently feel abrupt — the world changes slowly, but unceasingly, and so it can feel as if it is moving fast. In light of this sense of accelerated movement in my life, I more often 'practiced' a lightness of being, oriented gently towards the array of reactions and ponderings that arose within me at the awareness of the singular, fleeting nature of that particular transitional period. I recognized the diverse opportunities that lay before me — the chance to branch out into new interests; the chance to challenge myself academically in a way that high school hadn't permitted; the chance to divest myself of years of social preconceptions and seek out fulfilling friendships — and I recognized the obstacles that might impede my course forward. I recognized that I was slightly less than one-fourth of the way through my likely lifespan, and was overwhelmed with both mortal humility and determined resolve.

Over the course of several days, I thought a lot about what I had accomplished over the last four years, and I considered both how far I had moved ahead and how many paths lay yet untrodden. I had entered high school as a lonely, bullied boy, burdened by unhealthy digital



habits and a toxic lack of social skills and connections, and over the course of four years I had endured a magnified continuation of all that had ailed me beforehand; had nonetheless begun to touch upon the beauty of the world; had ached for want of friends to share that beauty with; had twice attempted suicide; had gradually, with the help of my teachers and the good fortune of happenstance, stabilized much of my existence; had worked to start embracing, alone yet content, the concomitant beauty and horror of humanity; had experienced deep disappointment in terms of my collegiate goals; had recovered from that disappointment; had, at long last, nurtured a precious few friendships, not the end of the road but the beginning; and had come out on the other side of high school as a person who, having survived the worst of his own cruelties, was eager to move forward, not unencumbered but of the understanding that being encumbered did not mean one ought to simply stay still. I was moving ahead.

I had written some semi-angsty poetry in prior days and years, sure, and yes, in some ways I had mirrored the same teenage stereotypes that I loathed to see embodied in others — some caricatures do have a tragic element of truth to them. Yet I had always also been searching for something greater; I had somehow touched the fringes of a beauty that I hadn't been prepared to begin to understand, and had been lost without fellow searchers. Even when I was at my lowest, it had been because I wanted with all my heart to live more fully; to live adventurously alongside others, vulnerable and human until the last. I was seated in a kayak, but I wanted to learn how to also paddle a canoe.

In now tracing the strands of my life backwards fully along the weave, it has become apparent to me that the inklings of my present curiosities draw their first coherent threads from this adolescent period of my life, perhaps beginning when I was twelve or thirteen. Those threads themselves have their own earlier origins, as all threads do, but they became distinct in those years of internal turmoil: new mixtures of color, unfamiliar, struggled to stand out against a darker fabric that was loathe to yield to them. That these multihued threads gradually emerged to dominate the pattern is one amongst a plentitude of beautiful absurdities; I weaved the threads with each and every moment of my being, and yet, for much of my life, the weaving was unwitting, and rarely felt like it was building towards any sort of greater fabric. Indeed, it usually felt that I was being smothered by the world's largest ball of twine.

For years, I had tormented myself. I blamed myself for my inability to bond meaningfully with other people, and I assumed that my lack of success in that regard was a reflection of some sort of gaping flaw in my conduct or character. Accordingly, I made efforts to revise my conduct and character; to seize self-agency, for, while I could not control the ways of the world, I could carefully attend to my own personhood. Yet none of this was sufficient, and, given that I found myself unwilling to exert blame on anyone or anything other than myself — the people around me were at times unkind, at times self-absorbed, but they were not personally responsible for my isolation — I looked further inward, and all that I could do, perhaps all that I wanted to do, was continue to abase myself. I could not name the source of my malaise, and so I named myself.

But the fact of the matter — a fact which I did not understand until many years later — is that neither my discontent nor my loneliness were my fault. They weren't anyone else's, either, not really; there was no source. There was no singular cause. It all just was. I could point out the fundamental lack of vulnerability in much of American social culture, especially in the modern era, but elaborating broadly upon such systemic problems would not be enough. The grain of the explanation is finer than I can ever tell; it was not that I was destined to suffer — what an arrogant, infantile notion! — or that the world was an abominable place. It wasn't that the cynics were right. It was simply that the ways of the world, complex and not always fair, were stifling by virtue of their inarticulable intricacies. I was not accustomed to the thicket, but,

having passed unwittingly between the widest gap in the brambles, I could go no way but forward, deeper, deeper. It is as Pynchon once wrote, in a letter to a suicidal friend:

“The world *is* at fault, not because it is inherently good or bad or anything but what it is, but because it doesn't prepare us in anything but body to get along with. Our souls it leaves to whatever obsolescences, bigotries, theories of education workable and un-, parental wisdom or lack of it, happen to get in its more or less Brownian pilgrimage between the cord-cutting ceremony and the time they slide you down the chute into the oven, while the guy on the Wurlitzer plays *Aba Daba Honeymoon* because you had once told somebody it was the nadir of all American expression; only they didn't know what nadir meant but it must be good because of the vehemence with which you expressed yourself.”

Everyone ultimately makes their own way in this world, in the sense that we are born alone, we live alone, and we die alone, materially and mentally distinct from one another: no one shares a consciousness. No two think as one, even when they finish each other's sentences, or share a laugh, or tears, or frustration. It is, however, in the sharing of those other things — fear, sorrow, joy, disappointment, regret, wonder, hope, love — that we find kinship with one another, and can come closest to filling and breaching the boundaries of the self. In terms of our nature as social creatures, we are made who and what we are by virtue of what it is that we share with one another and what we receive from others, intentionally and unintentionally, knowingly and unknowingly, through conversation; through literature; through television; through observation; through implication and explication.

Loneliness is not a monolithic state of being. It manifests in many gradations, many colors, some of them healthy, helpful, entirely un concerning. But there are other kinds of loneliness, too; varieties that are intense, prolonged, appearing at first like an oncological shadow before metastasizing. Upon reflection, I think that my own experiences with such loneliness stem from a perceived and/or actual imbalance of sharing. Throughout most of my childhood, I *received* plenty — I spent more than half of my waking life in front of a computer screen from the ages of eleven to sixteen, which, while a regrettable use of time, nonetheless exposed me to a cornucopia of information and ideas, some of it factual, some of it false, some of it farcical, some of it frustrating, almost all of it fascinating. But despite my longings, I shared very few intimate experiences with others — I went through school with all of my peers, indeed, and I exchanged casual chit-chat in the hallways every now and then, and these were experiences shared. But they were not vulnerable, personal conversations; discussions about world affairs or books or films or television; visits to see a new place, or meet a new face.

No one who is lonely lacks people in their life, in the most basic sense. Even a lonely old widower who rarely leaves his apartment has people in his life: he likely watches people on television, reads about people in magazines, and at the very least has a lifetime of kaleidoscopic memories that he carries with him. What a lonely person lacks is companions with whom they can comfortably (and uncomfortably) share certain things. When one is lonely, moments still pass into and on from one another, as moments do; thoughts still swirl; emotions still swell and ebb; and one still goes on being a distinct consciousness with a complex internal life. But that complex internal life is skewed: one receives input from outside, and one negotiates, interprets, and incorporates that input, but one does not conduct these processes in a social setting, nor does one have the opportunity to continually express an output. One is denied a certain degree of validation; legitimacy; clarity. One's notions and emotions are rarely met with external skepticism, nor external reinforcement. It becomes difficult to distinguish between a clever thought and a banal thought; a worthwhile idea and a sloppy idea; an enduring conviction and a temporary emotion. One can begin to feel rather solipsistic.

My experience with clinical depression manifested in a manner that was eminently physical, for though never do we touch our thoughts — they have no shape that we can discern — every now and then, somewhere along procession of the days of our lives, we can viscerally *feel* the materiality of our mind. We might have a certain sort of headache, or think with intensity on some matter or the other, and our mentality sharpens, coagulates: we perceive some sort of literal density within our own heads.

This is how I felt for most of my adolescence. I felt isolated, inadequate, worthless, and, moreover, without the most basic control over my sense of self. No matter how hard I strained, it seemed that my brain was a cranial cotton swab, or perhaps a dense hive of wasps, so crowded that they were always stinging each other, stinging the walls of my skull, and yet never dying. My being felt soundproofed: if an echo entered, it never left, bouncing around and around and around, running into other sounds, transmuting, but always it was a dull throb that did not cease. I *felt* the neural networks of my brain rewiring and reinforcing themselves in manners that I did not approve of, that contributed to a decline in my mental fortitude and wellbeing, and yet I could do nothing to freeze or trim or reroute the connections. Eventually, I stopped wanting to trim them: the desiccated web, starved of various chemicals, began to feel like the only thing that made sense. It ossified, a new skeletal structure of being: a Münchmeyer's disease of the material mind.

I found unhappiness to be within easy grasp, and I quickly smothered any faint flashes of corner-dwelling positivity. I felt an all-consuming terror lurking from within me, and I felt like my own enemy, and I was. I simply *did not understand* the goings-on of my own mind; the what, the why; the clutter, the unpleasantness; the seeming choice and lack of choice, indistinguishable, inseparable, co-terminus.

It was a long loneliness, and loneliness can be such an inextricably personal ailment, with such intimate consequences. The pain that I felt at being unable to develop a more fulfilling livelihood had been nigh unbearable, pervasive, punishing — and yet its existential origins felt so utterly *impersonal*. I knew that some of my peers were experiencing similar struggles, and I longed, without avail, to find community and solace in them. I knew with visceral understanding that others near and far were multitudinously worse off than I was, and I knew that the world was not conspiring against me, and I knew that there were so many reasons for me to be thankful and hopeful, and I knew that there were countless beautiful, wonderful things in this world of ours, for I had seen plenty of them — and yet the knowing only made the pain worse. The excruciating existential neuralgia of it all had stripped me bare, and that's the thing about suffering: some pain can, admittedly, be more intense or extreme, more extensive or durable, more justified or impactful or in more need of urgent address than other pain, but pain is still pain, no matter who feels it, or why.

Haruki Murakami once wrote of a man without a woman, who fell into an abyss. There, the man found himself wishing for a machine that could measure sadness with numeracy and accuracy, and, upon first encountering the notion, I wished for a similar contraption — though my woes were not for lack of women, but for lack of people at all. But it occurs to me that the larger a number becomes, the more difficult it is to comprehend with any meaningful, scalar understanding; quantitative data is vulnerable to desensitization. Even having myself experienced prolonged depression of a clinical grade and nature, my eventual movement beyond such environs has limited my ability to fully contextualize any theoretical empirical measurement thereof.

Nonetheless, I suppose such a machine might be interesting. It might help me measure: how deep was the sorrow? Regardless of the haze that overlies the comparison of pain against pain: how much did I suffer? Would pain, and my pain, be measured with whole integers; on a

scale allowing for decimals; on a scale of two digits, three, four, five, six? How much pain suffused my being over the longest of the seasons of my erstwhile life? For I cannot say. I am now almost five mere years from the period of my deepest discontent, and yet I am limited in my ability to truly know. No one else can tell, and I have not since known a pervasive long-term wretchedness comparable to that which hounded me throughout the last several years of my childhood.

I can remember, but it is not like other kinds of memory. If I remember the smell of the pantry at my Nana and Papa's home on Simpson Terrace, I can replicate that memory by walking into the pantry at home and summoning my olfactory senses. I cannot, in an instant, for an instant, replicate a complex mental framework that was the product of many years of moments. I can glimpse a shadow; a silhouette seen through bedsheets on a clothesline; but if I truly ever return there, it will be because I have returned there: not because I am visiting. In this way, my own experience with depression is a lucky one. Others live forever with a full hive of wasps.

As things had happened, people had left me alone, and so I became lonely, and so I wondered why, and so I started to think, and think, and think, and feel, and cultivate an internal life — because that was all that I had — and in the process I flagellated myself just enough to become ready to change. I had to experience a fundamental, basal crisis of self, of loss, of lack, in order to learn how to live; I had to carve a hole, a hollow, in order to allow it to heal: and now I have a garden of stelliferous self growing within me, and I can't mow it over. I would never want to. I prune its excesses, and I keep it green, but it grows more vibrant, more multifarious, more expansive each month, each year.

None of my experiences had permanently hardened me — if anything, they had gradually softened me, made me stronger for my willful vulnerability, made me disdainful of hogwash about emotional imperturbability. I had become unable to resist exploring the contours of my own feelings, whether serene or saturnine; I had become inexorably fascinated by the internal lives of others, of the few and the many, and I had learned that this curiosity was something that I needed to celebrate, rather than drown in.

What I developed during this time of my life was a mental reflex, neither solely intellectual nor solely personal: a reflex against lying to myself about myself, and about what I saw in the world. A reflex against reductionism, in favor of complexity, ambiguity: in favor of fleshing out and seeking definition in regards to the whole, rather than finding a resting point in the middle of the road. There were some illusions that I knew I didn't want to have: they weren't constructive, nor were they necessary. I had learned that the truth, though at times unpleasant, didn't have to make me unhappy. It didn't have to make me jump with joy, either: the only expectation I had was that I would accept it, attempt to understand it, and try to embrace the healthy perpetuity of inner conflicts of conception. Human beings and human life are not without limitations, but the boundaries of a shape are essential to understanding what lies within the fold.

I am glad that I am unsure of many things. Confidence and certainty are overrated: to acknowledge ambiguity and embrace some degree of doubt is rarely a deleterious approach. It is realistic. At some point during the latter years of high school, I asked myself: after all that I had experienced and experienced a lack thereof, after all that I had learned and learned I had not learned, how could I be anything other than uncertain? What are we if not lost? And isn't that lostness beautiful?

In time, I learned that I wanted to know, with some level of visceral understanding: how was it that other people tried and succeeded — and often failed — to learn how to live with themselves, with each other? How was it that they endured suffering; overcame it; found joy, in

places both plausible and implausible? How was it that our common humanity manifested in the form of difference; disagreement; destructive conflict, agonistic conflict? There were so many answers, at once intimate and universally shared. It was a good place to begin.

By the beginning of my senior year, I had discovered for myself that this world is a verdurous landscape, full of things to build with. I picked up pieces and made them into something, and sometimes that something strangely resembled the whole made by others, and yet it was always my own creation — and that's what life is: a project of existential bricolage, constructed over a saeculum from shapes here and there that were rarely expressly meant to be with each other, yet which fit together all the same. It is like building a wall with found stones, lumpy and misshapen, cracked and shattered, all drawn from different places, sometimes part of the same stratum but not always: with care, they jigsaw together in an emergent stability.

In time, I understood that I would never be able to happily live without gathering rocks and other pieces of the world, biotic and abiotic, human and nonhuman; seeing how they relate to one another; and fitting them together, at times smoothly, at times with an awkward beauty. I would do this foremost in my mind and in my heart, an exercise in the cultivation and expression of my internal life — but also with keyboard and document, and with other methods besides. It could be a suffocating task at times, worrisome, stressful, depressing — not the act but the outcomes — but it also just felt... right. Necessary.

During one of my summer self-reflections on these matters, I remembered a conversation that I had had with Mr. Kline towards the end of my senior year, a conversation which had centered around my lingering disappointment with the financial untenability of Macalester College and my decision to attend Western. We went back and forth about the arbitrary nature of university admissions; the strange admixture of acceptance and discontent that permeated the forefront of my mind; and my hopes and fears going forward. Mr. Kline talked about how his own collegiate experience had transpired, complete with implacable dissatisfaction and multiple transfers between undergraduate institutions.

I shared that while I had been crushed by the ultimately illusory possibility of going to St. Paul, I felt somehow relieved at simply having made a choice, and I had started to warm to the idea of attending an institution that was both closer to home and far less likely to rub off as elitist. Nonetheless, I was uncertain of whether I would meet kindred spirits and be exposed to the kinds of professional connections that I worried about requiring. I was trying to put a word on how I felt, at once pensive and hopeful; at once still listening to the echoes of bygone hopes and learning to appreciate the sounds of a different road. I found that I was unable to do so — for whatever reason, the terminology became unusably garbled in my brain — but Mr. Kline stepped in. “Maybe,” he said, “the word you’re looking for is ‘open’.”

“Yes,” I said to him, and simultaneously to myself, “I am open.”

Even by the end of the following summer, there were times when I still felt deeply lonely. I hadn't yet fully come to terms with the nebulous, perhaps unknowable reasons behind my social sufferings, and I was not entirely satisfied with the summer friendships that I had developed with Ana, Rachel, and Portia. Every now and then, I felt like an intellectual and social imposter, or argued with my mother, or lost my temper, or wondered whether or not any of my social entreaties were truly worthwhile. Sometimes, I felt old, weary; or I felt like I only existed inside of myself. I had regrets, although I did not yet have the courage to accept them, and I wondered if I could have tried harder to reach certain goalposts.

My worst mentalities and moments always passed, often after a night of rest or a conscious push on my part — but neither those mentalities nor their progenitorial strands of thought and feeling simply disappeared. That wasn't how people functioned: we had to address each of our

ills, ameliorate them, perhaps learn to live with them. I held it close to my heart that each of us deserved help from others in doing so, but I had not yet cultivated the intimate relationships that I wanted to put at the center of my life, and I hadn't the foggiest notion what steps I needed next take to further my work.

But all in all and on the whole, I was proud of myself. It was strange, because I had never found a good reason to be proud of myself before, and I wasn't fond of pride in general: it too often led people into arrogance. This time, though, I had earned it.

During another of my summer self-reflections on these matters, a thought occurred to me, and it seemed, at first, presumptuous: then, beautiful. I thought to myself that I had made it through, and that the worst had already happened, and that no matter what I confronted over the course of all the days of my life, nothing would ever impel me to brutally sandpaper away so much of my self as I had in my youth. I realized that though many things would henceforth be difficult, and though at some goals I would whiff and fail and be forced to reconsider my options, nothing would ever be quite so arduous ever again. The day-to-day would be easy, and the rest would always be measurable against a greater turmoil, a greater stripping-bare.

I don't know if this thought will hold true until the day that I die, but so far, it's golden, if perhaps privileged. There have been one or two moments when it seemed rather a tad hokey in the face of present pain, but, with time, I always reaffirmed the notion. Perhaps it's an entirely arbitrary, self-fulfilling mechanism: but I doubt it. I simply think it's the truth.

After this still-golden thought occurred to me for the first time — and after I had resisted my urge to asphyxiate it with brutal efficiency, so as to avoid what I worried might be the seed of an outrageous delusion — a second thought effervesced to the forefront of my mind. It was August, and it had been not quite three years prior, in October of 2015, that I had first summited Mount St. Helens and stood, suicidal, on the ashen rim of the caldera. I had been to the general area of the mountain on two occasions since then, both of which were solo day-trips to pick huckleberries in Gifford-Pinchot. One of these trips included an auxiliary visit to Johnston Ridge and the surrounding environs — but I hadn't ascended the mountain itself for a second time.

It seemed to me that should I have the wherewithal, there was nothing preventing me from making another sojourn, this time alone, up to the caldera rim on the south side. The thought of again ascending the mountain rang as such a fitting notion; a venture in cyclicity, in return; a statement at once of self-defiance and self-awareness. If I were a man of any spirit not material, I would have called it a pilgrimage — a journey to touch the face of God, which once had scorched me.

I thought of Mark Twain, who was born two weeks after the passage of Halley's Comet in the autumn of 1835, and later wrote that he hoped to go out with the comet as he came in with it.

He died one day after the comet's perihelion in the spring of 1910.

Though this trip to Mount St. Helens was not a journey to my own death, it was a journey to a place where I had come close to enacting my own end: the concord of it all was powerful. It was a chosen serendipity.

Later in the afternoon, I logged onto the Forest Service's website and purchased the first expediently available climbing permit. It was the busiest season for recreation on the volcano, but come October I would be tied up in school, and besides: my first ascent of the mountain had occurred just two weeks before the conclusion of the regular climbing season, and it was

somewhat an aberration that the weather had been bright and sunny all day. By making a return visit in the summer, I would avoid being subject to the whims of autumn alpine weather.

I marked a date on the calendar: August 24th. It would suffice.



# The Mountain and Me II

---

I left in the morning, at close to 7AM. The climb would require close to an entire day, and it was in my interest to avoid the more numerous early-afternoon trekkers.

On the drive northwards, I listened to Vashti Bunyan's *Just Another Diamond Day*. It is not a prime album for the highway, as the softness tends to be smothered beneath the whirring of wheels on pavement — but I wasn't quite as sensitive to those sorts of things, back then.

The road that branched up to the Climber's Bivouac trailhead was a tad too narrow for my easy comfort; I didn't remember how it had looked when I first ascended the mountain with my parents, and had no frame of reference beyond satellite imagery. While a far cry from the 4x4 trails that undergirded many of our family vacations, it was not a road that I would have felt safe driving in the autumn or winter, if only because I drove a twenty-one year old Camry that had about as much snow-treading capability as a desert tortoise. The road also reminded me a bit too generously of the one-lane forest service road that wound up Goat Mountain, and on which I had briefly, asininely stranded myself earlier in the year.

The trailhead parking lot was relatively sparse, and I encountered only one or two other hikers while I prepared my backpack. I felt fortunate: a public-use trail is a public-use trail, but this was not a hike that I wanted to make in the company of others, strangers or no. I wanted to reserve time to be alone with my thoughts along the way up to the summit.

Once again, I forgot to apply sunscreen before beginning the ascent. Some things simply don't change.

Walking through the evergreens of the intra-timberline portion of the trail, I took time to appreciate precisely what it was that I was doing. Not only was I going out to find enjoyment in recreating by myself, but I was also engaging in an extended act of memorialization and active self-reflection. I was taking the reins of my own remembrance; imposing secular ritual onto my experiences; and, perhaps I might say, stacking unruly stones together to build a retaining wall. I knew that I was doing something which I wouldn't forget, and which would become a milestone within the internally told narrative of my life. It felt good to perceive and exercise that sort of comprehensive agency.

Though it was morning, the sun was poking through the cloudy sky, and shafts of light filtered down amidst the pine trees. I had taken off my shoes for this first part of the hike, and I could feel the fragile warmth of daybreak stir in the lines of the sunlit soil. For the first time, I noticed with pointed focus how it is that the conifers were free of foliage at the bottom of their trunks: an obvious feature, but so obvious that I had not consciously recognized it before. It is akin to how we do not cognize that we are eating an ovary whenever we bite into an apple, nor stand in wonder each winter at the fact that snowflakes are crystals.

After crossing the steady trickle of Swift Creek, I donned my boots and began the ascent up the gravel field. At this point, my thought processes dimmed: I had to hew my attention to where I was stepping, and to the stepping itself. My heartbeat accelerated; my breathing deepened; and my legs began to burn. Every few hundred feet, I would stop and look back across the lower slopes and forested hills out yonder, or lean down to look at the brittle weeds that tangled upwards and outwards from crevices in the talus. I took off my button-up plaid and tied it around my waist, and used the dangling sleeves to wipe the sweat gathering on my forehead.

In time, the gravel turned to stones, then to boulders; and field became ridge. Looking upwards, I saw only a massive bulge of craggy rock, spreading out across the horizon of my vantage. The trail became a puzzle to follow, and I had to pay close attention to how much water I was gulping down. I caught up to two or three other hikers and passed them by; compared to my first ascent, I was much more accustomed to the haphazard nature of the bouldered ridge. I had made a habit out of rock-hopping down by the Willamette and in several other spots, and, while none of those locations involved such arduous elevation gain, it was the principle of practiced balance that aided me.

After about two hours of walking, then scrambling, I approached the Steps. It was like what I imagine it is to greet an old, true, sarcastic friend: “Ah, you again.” The difference, of course, is that I gasped out my welcome in several heaving increments, much the same way that one might attempt to speak after choking on a glass of water and find that the words exit in halting, truncated portions.

I stopped for a lengthy rest and water break; ate two packages of fruit snacks; and spotted two return hikers, a young couple who had probably set out a wee bit before dawn. I smiled to myself upon sighting them, because this hike was exactly the sort of venture that I would want to drag a significant other out to accompany me on. Then, I got a little wistful, wondering whether or not I would actually be able to meet someone like that — romantic or platonic — in the years ahead. The feeling was brief.

After perhaps twenty minutes, I made my way up the first Step, stretching my legs upwards from one gigantic slab of rock to the next. I had enough foresight to briefly survey the landscape prior to the ascent of each Step, which allowed me to economize my routing ever-so-slightly; the tiniest bit of planning really counted, but there were limits as to what could be done to streamline movement across such talus-heavy terrain.

The scramble continued onwards, and that was what the most doubtless similarity between my prior ascent and the ascent at hand: the exhaustive, seemingly interminable length of the Steps that lay across and above Monitor Ridge. Standing on the somewhat level terrain between each intermittent ascent, I couldn’t see the next tier above or the prior tier below. I still wondered to myself as to when the damnable Steps would hurry up and end, but it didn’t feel like a gloomy existential metaphor: it was just a trail, albeit a very special one.

I passed above the last of the Steps and, from there on, began the comparatively smooth ascent of the scoured upper slopes. Spots of snow lingered here and there, and looking to the sides I could see the contours of fragmented alpine glaciers. They looked soft, less like imposing sheets of ice and more like natural deposits of vanilla ice cream. My stomach gargled cheerily at the thought.

The final section of the upward climb was an utter slog, just I had remembered. I briefly contemplated taking off my shoes in order to make it through the sandy debris — it would likely have been easier than wading up with boot-clad feet — and I even leaned down to see if the slope was prohibitively hot beneath the sun, but I ultimately decided against it. I didn’t want to end up stepping on fine-grained shards of rock that would endanger my safe descent.

Eventually, I saw the lip of the mountain’s rim, at eight-thousand feet. The rim was uneven, and a makeshift trail ran along it both east and west; I tramped to the west a short ways, to the highest reachable point of vantage. Standing there, sidled on the brim of the caldera, I gazed out at broad expanses of land in all directions. To the south, I saw the Cascade foothills arrayed below, most of them tree-lined, a few cut with logging stands. The curve of Swift Reservoir was tucked away to the immediate south, and another body of water — Yale Lake, I

believe — lay a bit to the southwest. Farther off, the prominence of Mount Hood was clearly visible in distance, and, squinting through my binoculars, I think I might have glimpsed the barest outline of Mount Jefferson. It was just over a hundred miles away, about one-fifth of the north-south distance between Washington's northern border and Oregon's southern border. I teared up.

To the east, I saw Mount Adams, vivid in the lenses; to the west, the South Fork of the Toutle River, scrabbling down the mountainside. And to the north, in the distance, I saw many things. I saw Mount Rainier, glacier-capped and tall against the horizon; Spirit Lake, nestled below amidst the roiling, rent-asunder landscape; the outermost fringes of the sprawling Puget Sound metroplex, represented by the southern extensions of Puyallup; the North Fork of the Toutle River, forever changed but nonetheless flowing on into the day and into the dark and on beyond the dawn; and Johnston Ridge, altered in the eruption but still distinct amongst the innumerable declivities of the blast zone.

The detailed beginnings of ecological succession were scarcely visible from such a height, but the scale of the eruptive devastation was clear at the forefront of the panorama; looking closely, I imagined how the side of the mountain slid, a vast slice of earth cascading with a strange fluidity, a swiftness difficult to comprehend given the size of the landform subjected to movement. It was rather difficult to judge dimensions at such a height.

Directly below the rim, inside of the caldera, I saw the active lava dome rising from the mouth of the punctured mountain. The northern opening to the caldera, sloping downwards towards treeless pyroclastic deposits, was the frame to a portrait of disaster and recovery; and I stared for a time, and I thought about David Johnston, sitting in his folding chair, smiling into the camera. I've never thought of the eruption of Mount St Helens as having any particularly significant place in the grand scheme of human history and happenings — it doesn't — nor do I suppose that Johnston's actions were wholly unique in their way — they weren't. But looking out over the ridge where he died nearly four decades earlier, nineteen years before I was born, and imagining certain events within Johnston's life, I found myself immersed in memories of events that had never happened to me.

We cannot truly remember events that we did not experience, but, if we try hard, if we learn about what has happened in a place, and we dare to try and feel; to try and extend ourselves towards the practice of experience; to try and comprehend the complexities of life and the living, then, I think, it is possible to more wholeheartedly grasp the past and make the present precious to us. We have to be humble about our limitations, but if we want, in our heart of hearts, to practice a greater sort of compassion and understanding, we can try.

And that's what I did. I thought about what had occurred on Johnston Ridge in the tensile spring of 1980; about what it would have been like to wake up in the morning, alone, in a trailer parked on a lonely ridge beneath a volcano, and look out the window at the magmatic bulge on the side of the mountain. I thought about what it would have been like to tumble out of bed at dawn; stretch one's legs and arms; fix a simple breakfast, maybe a ham sandwich, maybe scrambled eggs; and then brush one's teeth, and walk outside, and perhaps take a piss in the bushes, because it feels good — even though most men won't just straight-up admit it.

I thought about how the wildflowers must have looked in the dappled morning light, swaying to the rhythms of soft dawn-sung breezes, and I wondered what Johnston saw and felt when the mountain erupted, cratered. Was there a perceivable rumbling in the moments before the north side slid off? What were the first thoughts that went through the mind of this man that I had never met and never would: how did he feel? When that mountainside crumbled and slid, solid, yet liquid earth, did he feel paralyzed with fear — or did he gaze in awe, recognizant of the beauty of the trembling planet, so massive, so uncontrollable, so ancient, and so perilously

forgotten? Host to life, but not alive; always moving, on a scale of time deeper and more patient, more immortal than our own, yet always still, too: for even the flow of a mighty river is but a rivulet on the back of a planet, an eruption merely an itchy sore.

It was somewhat of a morbid remembrance, and, as I imagined the cascading avalanche of superheated rock that buried Johnston, I was brought back to that day three years ago when I had stood atop the rim and contemplated enacting my own demise. It was not a pleasant memory, and yet I could not shy away from it: and it filled me.

I grew up in a family that never attended church or discussed spiritual affairs, and, despite having explored the scriptures and stories of numerous faiths, I have never believed in an after-death. I have knelt in prayer only once in my life, when I timidly asked God to return Skeeter, our lost tabby cat; I was eleven, and the gesture felt silly and desperate. I understand well that believing in an after-death utterly changes one's outlook on life and death, but I have no impetus or desire to put faith in such notions. To actively attempt to believe would be to fool myself into contradicting everything I have ever known — I do not want to believe.

It is not a matter of being supportive or opposed to religious faith; I am not necessarily against what others are for. I have my qualms with evangelism and proselytization and doctrinal severity, and, at times, I question whether religious faith as a concept in nebulous totality is ultimately a positive organizing principle and motivational force for humanity — although given that worship is something that people do, and that this will likely never change, I am not certain that the question is a useful one. Folks will continue to pray for peace and prosperity and a deified moral order of some shape and form, and they will continue to partake in fellowships of faith and community. Many will seek to spread their gospel; among these and among lay practitioners, some will prove to be tolerant, compassionate, understanding individuals, who accept different perspectives, spurn otherization, and see the greater commonalities of human nature that draw us to worship — and many others, alas, will kneel before an altar and speak of love while spewing rank prejudice out the other side of their mouth.

As concerns my own life, I would love to think that after I die, I will find renewal in the form of waking rebirth or eternal delight in the form of an empyrean paradise. It would be blissful beyond telling to watch over the mortal world and observe those who I will leave behind; to see over the ages how history and the stories of humanity unfold, for better and for worse; to forever satisfy my deepest curiosities and longings, learning the answers to bold questions and, at last, the outcomes of various mortal dilemmas.

It might be that some of the answers would sadden me; that humanity would disappoint me, one way or another. I might witness mankind take to the stars, fledgling voyagers in the vastness of space — or, I might witness us struggle amongst ourselves to no avail and without cessation, all until our sooner-rather-than-later extinction. I remind myself that even if we ventured out beyond the moon, travelers so small on a road that winds unto eternity, we might ultimately do so as interstellar colonizers, a rapacious threat to life on other celestial bodies.

I also remind myself that the last remnants of a squandered modern humanity could prove themselves admirable amidst the wreckage of our terrene follies, a source of some larger, almost tragic sense of human redemption in the face of no redeemer except ourselves.

Even if it entailed some form of reincarnation, or existing in a post-mortem realm much like our own mortal coil, with all of the same ills and woes, I would be gladdened to go forward knowing that some essential element of my thinking, feeling consciousness would live on without abrogation, to experience and consider and remember; that there is something human that goes on forever and ever, long beyond the death of one and even beyond the death of all mankind. I find the concept of a soul and an after-death to be viscerally appealing; a comfort

both in that it eases the pain of the prospect of un-being and in that it hints at the prolongation of all that I love about life and the living. Nothing could be brighter and more affirming than to know that I would see one day see again all those whom I have ever held precious, in an eternity of reunion and reconnection after the ephemerality of life. It would be wonderful to have something obvious to aim for; a clear moral standard; a truly “better place” — or, I suppose, the opportunity to mischievously haunt unsuspecting mortals.

Yet as dearly as I wish I had reason enough to believe in an after-death; in a benevolent divinity; in some greater fashioner of the laws that buckle our universe together in strange, chaotic order — I have no compelling proof, material or immaterial, and without compelling proof I personally cannot have faith. It is both a simple matter and a matter of the utmost complexity; faith is so often juxtaposed as requisite of no modern, scientific proof, simply spiritual conviction, and yet spiritual conviction arises, as I see it, from evidence. I cannot cultivate a genuine faith without a seed, and, though I have nourished many trees and many flowers from the soil, I have yet to find any sprouts that speak of divinity — and I know of no garden grown by immaculate means.

I have tried to believe in other things: that God is away on business; that the DJ is asleep on the radio; that though He has left us alone, shafts of light still sometimes grace the corners of our rooms — but for me personally, to attempt to sincerely believe even in such a passive divinity rings within me as only delusive and wishful; a distraction from that which I know is real and material and mortal, and a distraction from all of those myriad joys and sorrows and untold vicissitudes that come together to unfold outwards in the fabric of a human lifespan.

The prospect of the unknown forever; the emptiness; the cessation of one’s being; the yearning not to disappear, not to be put out of mind forever — it all hurts, yes. But if I am to live a satisfying life — one that focuses on revealing and portraying the material and moral depths of the universe, exquisite in its diverse complexities — then I cannot allow myself what I would I see as a cop-out. I would rather exist with mortal vulnerability and gratitude, continual and achingly sincere. I would rather remind myself each day of the inevitability of death and the opportunity of life; accept the inevitability and the humane beauty of sorrow and suffering, rather than seek to end it when it cannot be ended; and perhaps, by doing these things, I can in time make the final farewell a little bit easier — for it will be hard.

I think that the best that we can hope for is an easier goodbye, in the end. It would be nice if there were a God, and, more pointedly, it would be pretty to think so — but I cannot think so. With the exception of intellectual curiosity, I simply have no interest in believing in divinity or an after-death. I never have, and, from the first time I came to a visceral awareness of death, my fundamental conception of mortality has been one of absolute un-being. I have not always embraced this conception of mortality as absolute un-being as a boundless source of meaning, but it has always been my perspective — and it arose with rapid fluidity to the forefront of my mind on that day atop Mount St. Helens, as I remembered what it had felt like to try and die.

It was not pleasant to remember. For the last year or so, I had cultivated a conscious practice of *memento mori*, and had found the process very useful in re-centering myself if I ever got bogged down in extraneous particularities. But I had never quite before felt the same sort of faux-impending doom that then overcame me.

In the span of perhaps ninety seconds that were like a time outside of time, I entered and exited a state of altered consciousness. To start with, I felt dread become dreadnought within me, and I felt primal, pervasive fear at the thought of the onset of nothingness. Present dread intermixed with my vivid memories of my first ascent of Mount St. Helens, and I turned to look back at the destruction that once I had wrought upon myself. I felt like Lot’s wife.

I thought about what it would be like to be dead. Then, I realized that being dead wouldn't feel like anything. It would be nothing. If I were to be dead, I would be dead. Forever. My life would cease to be; it would reach an utter end, a state of permanent non-consciousness, and everything would go on without me. My body would decay under the banal materiality of death, and deepest time would pass by. I became aware in an instant that by dying, I would never be aware again. I would never participate in anything, ever again; I would never know how any of the stories went; how any of them ended; nor even that so many of them were continuing on.

I was mourning myself; experiencing anticipatory grief for my own death. I felt this grief to the point of knowing that I was eminently going to die; not in the future, not in a faraway time, but then, there, with immediacy. It was strange. I became unstuck in time, and I felt old: as old as a man who had lived ten thousand years, observing all the world as it changed and stayed the same. I felt like I knew everything — not every stitch nor every story on the tapestry, but, rather, the most emergent, overarching patterns, the fractal shapes that formed the broadest boundaries within which everything else was contained. Clarity, like stored honey, crystalized. Distance opened. Suddenly, I didn't particularly care about most of the things that had been burdening me of late. Either I cared about them from a vastly different perspective, or I didn't give a shit about them anymore.

The veil of death seemed to close further over me, a fibrous covering through which light at first leaked in, only to be blotted out as the fabric grew closer to my face. My chest felt empty, like my very being was shrinking and fading into nothingness. Intense terror gripped me. Memories came and went, and I wondered what would be left when I was one day gone and my body had been disposed of. What had I done? What had anything meant? What mistakes had I made?

Vivid flashes of nonlinear memory echoed within me, and I saw myself as a child, and it brought me tears; and I was a boy again. I was a little boy, and all that I had ever wanted was to be loved, and to love others. In some ways, this was because I had known love, and knew that it was good; in other ways, it was because I did not know love, and wanted to understand what it was. With all of my trembling, uncertain being, I wanted to understand.

But it was hard to want to understand — harder than anything else that I had ever done, and far more consuming. Sometimes I faltered; sometimes, I lashed out with anger, provoked and unprovoked. Yet nonetheless, I tried; I searched; I wracked my head and the chambers of my human heart: but I could not fill them with the songs of a life lived meaningfully alongside others. Rejection and dejection entered and pervaded; frustration welled and intensified; and I was in sorrow. I was lost, but not in the same way that we are all sometimes lost: it was the sort of lostness that overcomes a person who is searching aimlessly for something they are not sure they will ever find.

I had begun to doubt that others would ever extend love to me, and I had begun to doubt whether or not I could, or should, attempt to do so to them in turn, or even to myself. Despair acquired a semblance of reason; whether my vantage was from above or below, I came to see all things around me from a great, unbridgeable distance. I was an observer but not a participant, a fragile bird without a roost, out at sea too far by wing from any other land for me to survive. I no longer had the energy to beat against the prevailing winds of cynicism and hopelessness: instead, I relented. They began to carry me.

I was a deep sea fish: if I swam too far upward in the water column, I would become flabby and ugly and vulnerable. I did not belong up there, where the light reached; I was only able to live in the dark, and love was no longer a guiding star — it was the lure on an anglerfish, and I was

blind to the murk-masked truth, and I was swallowed. I fell into the distance between me and all the world apart; and as I fell, I wept, because that was all I could remember and all that I ever returned to. It felt like I knew nothing else.

Something happened to me then, on the mountain, that I cannot quite articulate with full-bodied justice, and I was jerked back to the present. It was an experience of the finest, most granular specificity; a sequence of thoughts and emotions that I have, over the passage of years, learned to experientially replicate for the sake of grounding myself in remembrance of the fact that I must die and that I want to live. Such moments of profound, morbid remembrance still seize upon me with peculiar randomness, but, through fruitful efforts and a long, far journey within myself, I have gradually developed the capacity to enter such an altered state of consciousness at quickened will. That altered state of consciousness brings me to the foremost point of existential perihelion, and my entry thereunto is the means that I use to ground myself; to maintain myself: to ensure that I will endure and prosper and remember what is true and what is important through all the many days of my life.

Atop Mount St. Helens on that August afternoon, at the peculiar intersection of memory and mortal dread, I felt disjointed between past and present. At first, overwhelmed by memory, I felt like I had been outside on a rainy day, and I had forgotten my jacket. The water had poured and poured, and there was no shelter; soaked, cold, and ill, my body had no choice but to become numb. But in that numbness, I became light; weightless. I felt nothing, then, at once, everything: the present made peace with the past.

There was a hole in the world, and it felt like I should have known; and gravity pulled me into that hole, then tossed me out on the other side. Down became up; bottom became top; darkness became light. In falling, I had begun to fly. As I passed through the inexorable emptiness that enabled all substance, I saw a blurry glimpse of the heart in the hole of the world.

Dante Alighieri wrote at the conclusion of the *Paradiso* that though he could not remember the contours of the figurative face of God, he would forever recall the feeling and the faith and the surety that the sight had engendered within him. Amidst the empyrean and evermore afterwards, everywhere, he felt his being turned — as in a wheel whose motion nothing jars — by the Love that moves the Sun and the other stars.

As I have said before, I am not a man of God. I never have been; my intuition is that I never will be; and though the concept of an after-death is appealing, I truly do not want to be a man of God. All of this being said, the things that I saw as I passed through the hole in the world and saw its heart — they moved my being in ways that I will spend the rest of my life attempting to comprehend and articulate. I saw and felt myself part of a wholeness within which all is contained; a wholeness that is amoral, without motive, without consciousness, without prejudice or favoritism. It cannot want; it cannot see; it cannot perceive; it cannot judge, reward, punish; it is not conscious, or aware, or even, really, an emergent cohesion: it just is. It is every it; it is everything; it is full; it is empty; it is shaped; it is shapeless; it is all connections, and it is all that is connected, and it is all the interstices betwixt. It is not nature; natural; unnatural. It is not to be reified, worshipped, or held as embodying the ideal or any ideal. It is full of mysteries and ambiguities and uncertainties; it is temporal, and yet timeless.

It is the stars as they move, and their movement, and the underpinnings of that motion; it is the universe entire, as it is, cause and effect and consequence, bound by laws strict and strange, things understood and not understood, biotic and abiotic, alive and dead; things conscious and not conscious, dichotomous and ambiguous, beautiful and horrible, moral and immoral and amoral, past and present and future. It is not a Love; not a deity; not a Gaian entity, not a

conscious planetary organismality; not a pantheistic, immanent divinity. It does not turn anything, as a person might push a wheel: it only turns, on and on and on — and when all is said and done, all humanity will have evolved and existed and feated and failed and prospered and perished within a fraction of a single degree of the movement of but one small corner of its' expanse. All of our love; our hate; our hope; our despair; our fear; our courage; and all of our questioning and answering and doubting and rethinking, our stubbornness and our ingenuity — all of this, everything and yet nothing, nothing and yet everything, is a part of it, a small part, but the only part of it that we will ever live out into being.

What happened within me as I passed through the hole in the world was akin to the process of changing photo-slides on an antique projector: pull a lever, and one picture is swapped out for another underneath the scope. Up there on the mountain, I gazed out upon a snapshot of the same ever-turning, ever-changing world that I had always known, but the angle, the lighting — those were altogether different. They were as such to where everything was oriented with euphony: a concord born not of flawlessness, but of agnosticism, agonism, concomitance; not an intrinsically brighter, more hopeful angle, but an angle that allowed brightness and hopefulness to be born and held, the product of the recognition of a sublime wholeness.

One can see sublimity as any number of things, of course. It can be rare; common; dichotomous; ambiguous; embodied by balance; embodied by harmony. From the rim of the mountain, I saw sublimity in the form of pervasion; as materiality and reality, one and the same; the world, biotic and abiotic, bound by an intricate physical order of laws and adaptable systems. It was a material unity that encompassed human beings and everything that has ever driven or inspired us to believe in the divine; the supernatural; the immaterial. It was a wholeness more easily visible in certain forms, but which encompassed all things and all in-betweens, the subliminal order and lawfulness which aligns them, and all alignments which ever have been or will be; a wholeness whose parts elicit many reactions from us human beings and from other forms of life, and all of which said reactions are thusly part of the sublimity itself — irregardless of whether their hue be blue or red or green or gray.

It was a moment of culmination; a fitting together of all of the pieces that I had thus far gathered over the span of my life. I bore witness to a clarified sublimity for the first time, and a series of sharpened visions passed through me; simple, unremarkable visions, with no hidden meanings, no distended symbology. I saw a candlelit lantern aloft outside a barn; a stove full of wood, burned white, skeletal, emanating warmth; a stout oak, standing alone in the middle of a vibrant, sunny meadow; an a-fluttering sheet of butterflies passing underneath a canopy of tree-stars. I saw a father pushing his daughter on a swingset; an old man cooking macaroni for a dinner party; a farmer and his dogs, herding sheep, picking stones; friends sitting around a bonfire, burning an extricated tree stump, singing; and I saw a rabbit trapped in a brambly thicket; a cup of loose-leaf tea, gathered from a garden; an aurora borealis, swirling in an Arctic sky. I saw a vase, moulded from clay, and though it had been cleaved up and away from the muck, it would always retain its source: it would always be distinguishable, yet not separable.

I think that I was in part remembering my own life as I wanted to live it — as I would live it. I saw all of these visions, and I wanted urgently to see them; to be party to their creation; to be moved by them *in situ*, rather than in substitute. There were still so very many things that I wished to do in life! There were scenes to see; stories to hear and read and reconstruct and craft and tell and weep at and smile at. Matters of great interest and curiosity abounded. There was work to be done and fun to be had; there were people and places to meet and know and part from and move on from — and I knew that even when the road wound long and rough and my heart grew weary; even when things came along that hurt me and engendered within me the deepest sense of despair; even then and especially so, those pains would always be a part of that greater sublimity: not good, not bad, but whole, and therefore beautiful. It was a beauty



of completeness, connectedness; a beauty that emerged not because of the wondrousness of some of its constituent parts, not because of any inherent goodness or righteousness, but because of the wholeness of how all of its pieces all fit together, always, even as they changed.

It was a wholeness without harmony, a collage of sublimity: and I wanted to see what other forms that sublimity took. I wanted to see how it is that things emerged; how they converged, diverged; how all was distinct, yet not separate; how all of the stories and their substances and subjects went on, beginning and ending yet never disappearing — only branching. I wanted to understand as much as I could, in my brief little while, how it was that everything is connected; how it was that things were born, how they lived, how they died. I wanted to know what people were made of.

Life was meant to be more than what I had known as a troubled adolescent, and, in that moment, I realized that for quite a while, life *had* been more; and thus, in that moment alone, life was more. I realized that I had rounded the bend, and not into the path of a train: and everything that came before that moment thus *became* more. I was afraid of dying — indeed, it would be shit to be dead; I would miss everything — but I also wanted to live, and I knew that even when it hurt, I would just do it all again, because that's what people did. More than ever, I wanted to live, and I think that was why death had frightened me so viscerally. There would come a time when I had to pack my shit and go away, and I was gladdened that, three years prior, I had not rapidly accelerated the ticking-along of years on the timeline.

The moment was diluvian. It unmade me, then remade me. Though I understood the pain I had once felt, I was saddened by the foolishness of my earlier youth — I had gotten it all so very wrong. I had always been crashing in the same car: but from the stereo, a song had rung out, saying Hey! That's no way to say goodbye. Once, it had been as if I was in a building with many doors to the outside; I could see them, understand them, touch them by the handle — but they were all locked. I was trapped within myself. And it came to me that I had to put my fist through the windowpane; and it was such a funny feeling, and I wondered: was it just mud that breaks the whole world window?

I died before I died, and I was re-enlivened without forgetting; and I awoke, and I remembered everything. *Memento mori; memento vita*. I had never been looking for a way out: I had been searching for a way in. I had never wanted to leave. I had never wanted to be airlifted out of the crater of Mount St. Helens in a polyethylene bag, broken and unmoving and dead.

Looking out over the landscape from a great height, I could not help but be heartened by the panoramic display of natural renewal that lay before me, miles away below the northern opening in the caldera. I laughed; I smiled; I wept; and the wind blew cold against my face, yet I was warm in the sunshine; and, at first, it all seemed very puny, our human world of houses and streets and parks. Then, in an instant, I felt my being open to the insignificant significance of all that I saw. I heard the unplanned atomic songs of an atomized existence, vibrating with every eerily choral breeze, every steadily thrumming glacier.

It was as if I were riding a comet, whizzing by the outer atmosphere of the Earth, and looking down upon the world as it spun; and though I was moving so fast, hostage to space and to time, all past was unveiled as present. In the open sky and chilly air, all of the years seemed to fall into place, yet also became indistinct; everything that I had learned thus far in my life blurred together, knowledge layered onto space — the names and stories of places, peoples, and peopled things, swirling all a-jumbled, sometimes arbitrary, sometimes empirical, often insufficient, and yet evocative of a fundamental clarity: the simplest, yet most intricate prism.

From the core of an atom of hydrogen, my vision moved upwards along the scale of material complexity. I saw a molecule of water; the intracellular fluid of a bacterium; a teeming shovelful of soil; an acre of dense woodland; a forest on a mountainside; a city, nestled in a valley; a valley beyond the first; the edge of a continent, carved in fractal shorelines; the sea that separated two landmasses; the planet entire, sonorous with winds and tides and currents; and then up, and up, and up, and outwards to the stars, each gleaming with light that had left them long ago and was only now perceptible to our eyes. All of it was made of a very few fundamental things, governed by a bevy of physical laws — some mostly definite, some highly debatable — and the interaction between these fundamental things and those laws, all there for *whatever fucking reason*, rendered infinite complexity. From few, everything: like musical notes into a song that made philosophers and scientists blow a quantum-mechanical gasket.

When first I had summited Mount St. Helens at the age of fifteen, what I saw from the caldera rim was death; destruction; a gray, barren expanse, unto which human bone would be a welcome dash of stark color. This time, I saw life, and the pastel largesse of life; the precious rarity of love; the beauty of spring flowers, summer breezes, autumn leaves, winter snowdrifts; the utter magnificence of the smallest objects, gestures, words, the universal embodied in the particular. I saw the same picture from angle after angle, each bringing new perspective, sometimes new substance; and yet each angle, smooth or jagged, rapid or gradual, fit together with the next, each of them aspects of an uncut gem rather than separate mineral seams. All was enjambed: broken, distanced, distinct, yet continuous, inseparable. Eternal, yet ephemeral; confined, yet illimitable; empty, yet brimming. Boundaries without boundaries: infinite finity.

For but a moment, I stood silent upon a peak in Darien, and I wondered how it was that men from across the sea could ever have set foot there and looked out at the beauty all around them, before them, below them, within them, and set in motion what they had wrought; and carried further forward the motions already in flux, a part of them, them a part of them: the messengers, yet also the message.

Gazing out across the landscape, topography both familiar and unfamiliar, distance rendered distort, it wasn't that space seemed small, or that time seemed shallow: they simply seemed briefly compressed, all of one mote, one moment, containing everything. Scale and dimension seemed to collapse in upon themselves, and, de-centered, I saw across the long expanses of time and space, and I knew just enough to know nothing, yet everything, yet nothing. A feeling of balance pervaded my being, and I knew what was important; what was large, what was small, even if those things seemed an altogether different size when first my eyes had wandered over the form or the face. I knew that I would descend again to the elevation where I and other people dwelled, in our houses and settlements and cities, and even though I would at times forget my place within the sublime wholeness — because life is a day-to-day, moment-to-moment occasion, and nothing lingers always at the forefront of one's mind — I also knew that I would know forevermore, indelibly, the size of things. The memory of the moment would always be within me, until the day that I died; and I could remember it, and explore it, and sharpen it, and extend upon it, and it would never leave me.

In returning to the mountaintop, I had created something very precious for myself.

After about a minute and a half that felt much, much longer than it was, the moment faded; or, perhaps more accurately, subsided. The absolute clarity that I had experienced receded, leaving behind a sense of serenity that coexisted with physical delirium and light-headedness. Clouds started to roll in: the afternoon was passing on to early evening. The rhythms of my heartbeat calmed, aligning with a rain that did not fall — the sort of rain that patters, piddle-de-

pat, with a gentle steadiness; with a promise of renewal. Petrichor wafted from the rim of a collapsed volcano, yet there would be no rain, not in August: but there would be light.

I thought of Kurt Vonnegut, and quietly said to myself: "If this isn't nice, I don't know what is."

I set aside a few minutes to rest; to let the moment fully recede, and to appreciate what had just happened to me. I breathed deeply; took several swigs of water; and, in time, took one last look out across the crater, to the environs beyond. I saw the blobby mat of splintered logs that floated on the surface of Spirit Lake, and I remembered once reading about a population of marooned iguanas.

In 1995, a pair of hurricanes — Luis and Marilyn — battered the archipelago of Guadeloupe, in the Lesser Antilles. In the process, they stranded a population of wild green iguanas, sweeping them away from their indigenous habitats on the island of Basse-Terre, and, over the course of a month, forcing them to cling to a current-carried mass of roots and branches and trunks. They baked in the unobstructed Caribbean sun; endured battering winds and storms; and survived in the absence of fresh water. The iguanas eventually washed ashore on Anguilla, an island previously uninhabited by their kind, and subsequently established a breeding colony.

I felt like one of those green iguanas. After a long, unplanned pilgrimage, I had sighted dry land, and had carefully wandered from log to log until, at last, I touched my toes to warm sand. What lay before me was a new world — although not in the same sense that Anguilla was new to the iguanas. It was the same world that I had always known, but I would never look at it quite the same. I would always know that I floated, a fleck of lightness amongst the lightness of all being, between the sea and the soil and the stars: and that made all the difference.

Around this time, a few other climbers crossed above the lip of the rim. As such, I took my leave. Starting back down the mountain, I found myself stopping every now and then just to continue to absorb and process my experience at the summit. The descent itself was far less arduous than the climb, but I took many more rests.

After I passed beyond the sandy section immediately below the rim, I took my shoes off. I didn't want to wear them on the way down, come what may. It cost me a few bruises and scrapes, but nothing significant. Still: I don't imagine I will ever again come down a mountain while barefoot.

Dusk began to fall as I crossed out of the lower boulder fields and down into the woodland that marked the final return portion of the hike. My eyes saw the trees again for the first time; they seemed alien, the landscape foreign — not threatening, only new, rejuvenated by the grasping membranes of eventide light. I grazed my hand against the bark of a spruce tree growing along the path, and, though the tree was young, the scraggly notches seemed textured with ages upon ages. The western sky cycled through the shades of sunset, and bright blue horizon darkened to cerulean.

Down in the trees, the mountain slopes behind me, I could hear the calls of different birds disappear, one by one, as night slowly gathered; a few new sounds emerged from those who preferred a nocturnal lifestyle. Light pollution was minimal on the mountain, and so the stars were alive in a manner that I had never before paid attention to. The ambient silence of the lower slopes grew and expanded; my thoughts began to come and go freely, swirling and joining and parting, dancing with the fluidity of water poured into and out of a glass.

At the trailhead, I briefly sat down to rest on a fallen log. I snacked on a package of fruit gushers and a few cuts of beef jerky, then snuck away to take a revelatory piss in some bushes away from the parking lot. The sunburns on my exposed neck, face, and forearms pulsed an

angry red, and I groaned at the thought of the next week of aloe vera cream, peeling skin, and grossly uncomfortable movement.

Perhaps half a dozen vehicles remained at Climber's Bivouac, and it was about 6:30PM. The evergreen forest surrounding the trailhead lay low enough below the slope to render the mountain itself out of view from the parking lot. Despite this, as I sat on the edge of the car trunk and applied band-aids to the minor cuts on my extraordinarily sore bare feet, I looked back in the direction of the volcano. I liked looking back: it was necessary to move ahead.

The pensive thought occurred to me, looking back at the mountain, that I did not know when it was that I would die, or how, or where — would I die across the sea, a long far way from the town where I was born? Closer, perhaps even in the same Willamette Valley? And how would I die — painfully? Slowly? Peacefully, in my sleep? Would it be heart disease; cancer; a car crash? Would I die wizened and gray, or would I die in middle age — or in some part of my youth yet to come? Would I be alone when I breathed my last, my only confidants hospital staff, well-meaning, kind, trying to comfort just one more lonely patient, one more person, one more living being who, like everyone, deserves something, at the end? Or would I be surrounded by loved ones, encircling my bed, holding hands? And in the last knowing moment of my life, would I be at peace? Would I be ready to go; to cease? Could I — or anyone — truly be ready? Would I die with dignity — and what did it mean to die with dignity, really?

I wondered: many years in the future, when I had become an old man, my life not the same, my body not able to do all of the things that I used to do, would I, every now and then, feel a swell of epiphanic understanding and utmost joy, and smile at the memory of days that have gone by, and say to myself: "Ah, yes — it's still there! Always! Even after all my years!"?

I have my hopes, of course, but I really don't know, and I guess I don't have to. Sometimes, in coming to conclusions, one misses the point.

Something else bubbled up within my heart — an echo, the first of many, of my experience at the summit. It was brief, but as my emotions and thoughts swelled, I thought about how it was that we are here for just a mere little while, a moment perchance arisen, a flash in the pan of a omnidirectional cosmic stream that flows on and on and on, absurd, unbidden except by its own nature. We lively, living creatures, rooted to a rock that is *just* the right distance from our sun, well, we have our own natures, but we also have our own choices; and for us all, there is just time and time and time — and what we do with it. In the end, I think it will all be about love.

Right before I climbed into my car, I thought that one day, when I died, if I chose to be cremated — an open question, as I am fond of the notion of a natural burial — I would want at least some portion of my cremains scattered from the rim of Mount St. Helens. I thought that it would be fitting for some former part of me to return there, in death: the carrying-out of a final act of both appreciation and defiance, a circle connected at last. Ashes to ashes, I would be interred upon and within the earth, cold and hot, still and stirring, solid and fluid, and in all of the cosmic ages to come I would never again breath, or speak, or laugh, or smile, or think, or know, and the days would go on to days, going by, and the Earth would turn towards and against the sun: and it would all go on and on and on, rivers flowing under bridges, bridges crossing canyons, canyons carrying rivers.

The substances that composed me would, in separation and in elision, perchance nurture new life, though it would not change the fact that I was gone. I would transition from the biosphere to the lithosphere. The mountain would rise again to its former height, perhaps even taller, and what remained of me would be but flecks of pulverized bone in the head of a pimple on the surface of the Earth; and one day, someone would think of me for the last time, and I would be

forgotten, and yet I would remain, not in life but in having lived, and I would be back again, and again, and again, a stone made of stardust: and perhaps some small motey note of atomic song that was once a part of me would, in time, delve deep into the subsurface of the planet, and come to rest at the edge of the heart in the hole in the world. On and on it would all go, until the stars froze in the stellar sky and collapsed inwards upon themselves, and it would be the most beautiful thing! I would not see it unfold. No one would.

Somewhere, somewhen, there will be one of us, alone, the last, and then, a moment later, there will not be — we will not be. The last breath of humankind will be drawn, and, afterwards, a bird will twitter in the breeze-blown boughs of a tree. We will not hear it.

But for the time being, I wanted to count every beautiful thing I could see; and be here, in this curious life, plucking the fruit of every happening, bitter or sweet, and knowing their flavor. I wanted to laugh, and laugh, and laugh, and cry, for it seemed to me that it was so strange to be anything at all! And I wanted to beckon forth, and say to friends and loved ones not yet met and made: won't you come and walk and run and dance and play with me here, among the trees that are always green, beneath the daytime and nighttime starlight, amidst the teeming masses of materiality and humanity?

# The Things We Can't Forget

---

Back when I was in high school, I was one of those students that, as my father tells it, the other kids “hated because they were effortlessly smart.” This is true. But I never felt like it mattered to me, because what I really wanted — to be with other people, intimately and meaningfully — was something that, no matter how much effort I expended, I simply couldn't seem to achieve. My teachers usually told me that it was because I was more mature than my peers; that I was socially estranged not because anything was inherently wrong with me or because I was unkind, but because folks didn't know what to think of me, what to do with me. Their words sometimes rang hollow; other times; they felt totally true; and, quite often, I found it somewhat funny how much my teachers lifted up my writing and my intellect and my way of carrying myself, because it sometimes seemed to me that I never much won or had luck with anything, not really. More than ever before, I saw the beauty of what was in front of me, or within me, or within others: but it was still frequent for me to feel the pangs of the absence of that which I most wanted and wanted to be able to cherish.

Up until the end of high school — and, in many ways, for years afterwards — I never had much luck making friends; being recognized; being accepted; belonging. I never had much luck with a lot of things. I was frequently rejected, and I felt like my choices on many matters were inordinately slim in number not by any fault of my own or by own lack of privilege — I had plenty of that — but, rather because of circumstantial happenstance. And in the beginning, I blamed myself for all of it. I thought that I was somehow ‘wrong’; twisted; unworthy. I thought it was all my fault. I did not understand why I was so alone; why people did not reach out to me; why I did not feel loved; why I always seemed to fail. One thing after another after another, without end — it can break a person. It broke me.

Folks enjoy quoting Hemingway in *A Farewell to Arms*:

“The world breaks everyone and afterward many are strong at the broken places.”

They often forget to append the remainder:

“But those that will not break it kills. It kills the very good and the very gentle and the very brave impartially. If you are none of these you can be sure it will kill you too but there will be no special hurry.”

I would add something to this: the world can also kill those who are broken, but refuse to admit that they are broken. To be broken is not to be substantively reduced in mass; it is to be shattered to such a confused extent that one has a difficult time recognizing oneself and understanding how it is that the pieces of one's being fit together. Identity is fractured.

Brokenness opens wider, hazier spaces between things. When one feels the yawning emptiness of such spaces, it becomes difficult to discern between being empty and being broken; between the necessity of finding substance to fill spaces, the necessity of leaving some spaces be in order to provide structure, and the necessity of identifying and reassembling shards into self. It is harder still to be upfront with oneself about the reality of the latter: it can feel as if one is admitting of too much. I did not wish to acknowledge the degree to which I was lost and lacerated, and instead determined, on two separate instances, that I — not the world — would kill myself to avoid the burden of self-repair. I wavered, and that has made all the difference.

Though I am proud of all that I have overcome, I cannot pretend that I am alive and joyous as a result of a hidden reservoir of strength or a damning weakness. I am alive and joyous in large part because of absurd happenstance; because of chance; because, sometimes, the light of a splendid sun breaks through storm-clouds prior to the fall of night; because, years removed from the moment of my deepest despair, I saw something beautiful engraved in the lines and lives of the Earth from atop a mountain, and it moved me to realize that I had never sought death — I had only ever sought life, and I had sought it so fervently that I had almost died for fear of my failures, which were mine, and yet not my own insofar as they were not solely my fault, and this is part of the mystery: how is it that our pain is ours when it sources from that which we have (or have not) taken in from beyond ourselves, and how we fit into the broader picture of which we are a part?

Perhaps therein lies the nature of despair: it arises in the moment as a reaction against the fundamental inability of our own individuality to expediently alter our immediate reality. It's a thought I sometimes entertain.

Even when we are in despair, we find our ways; our whys; our hows: yet these ways and whys and hows are temporary. They are not sustainable. For years, I had worried that the path I had carved out of despair was a false trail, and the longer that I wore on, down the winding way, and the more that the way seemed bright, the more that I saw myself as hardy, the heftier my worries of falsehood grew. The day of my second summit of Mount St. Helens was the day on which my uncertainty regarding the tenability of my own state of mind at last ended; pulled taut, the band snapped in a new direction. I was free of myself, and free within myself.

I can never forget what it was like to be so thoroughly imprisoned within my own mind. There have been times in more recent years when the ecology of my being has shifted towards melancholy and great confusion, but I've never been back to the barrens, and I don't think I ever will return. And yet I can remember what it was like, to be so lost, so trapped, so alone; to feel so ill-fated, so unstable, so beholden to a single minuscule moment of doubt and distaste. I remember, too, how it eventually faded away, and how I found myself anew, and being able to remember this has served me well, and will continue to serve me well. Much wisdom can be found by falling into different holes, where the light is dim and the walls are steep and there doesn't seem to be a way out — until you find it, or make it. And the more holes you fall into, the easier each one is to escape.

It is not uncommon for friends and family to invoke phrases such as “snap out of it” or “think about it this way” in an attempt to aid those in their lives who have fallen into such holes. It is also common for those who are enduring depression to recoil from these platitudes; though I had no friends to offer them to me back then, I have seen them offered to others, and it makes my eyebrows twitch. Depression is not a funk from which one can extricate oneself with a little bit of positive thinking, in part because the brain has usually forgotten how to initiate, sustain, and integrate positive thinking. And yet, when I think back to how I recovered from my own adolescent depression, I remember that it happened over time — a long time — and yet I also remember that it occurred through the deliberate exercise of thought and willpower. It was at once a valley-sunk fog, clearing, and a lingering smoke, blown away, and this is strange, because, in essence, I recovered by changing how I thought.

It was not simple. It did not take a day, a week, a month, or a year, but two years, give or take. My recovery was absurd happenstance in the sense that I was at first unaware of its progress and only later on down the line began to actively push it forward; and yet my recovery was also hard work, intentionally chosen, intentionally crafted, in the sense that I spent many hours shearing away negative neural networks, combatting my own thoughts, worrying about whether the ossified structures would only grow back with greater aggression. Remembering

this time of my life scrambles my conceptions of cause and effect, action and reaction, and that is why I view it as properly absurd. Just as others do not suffer in precisely the same way and in the same circumstances that I have, I cannot expect others to recover in the same way that I did: without medication, without sustained therapy, without a significant change in general life circumstances.

In the years that have followed my second summit of Mount St. Helens, there have been times when I have lost sight of myself. I have been deeply confused; doubtful; hopeless. I have felt worthless; pitiable; existentially disgusting. I have lapsed into lazy ennui, bulwarked by generalization and over-analysis in regards to my own sorrows. Yet no environ has quite compared to where once I dwelt, and I have found myself capable of avoiding and escaping every hole that I have fallen into. Some of them are shallow, easy enough to step out of in a single heavy-footed bound; others, though large, are of a walkable gradient, and are more about finding the edges than rappelling them; and still other holes are deep, steep-walled, intimidating, and call on a person to bloody their hands on the edges of the stones, an acknowledgement of the circumstantial necessity and unavoidability of pain.

But no matter the hole, I have found a pathway out. I have found that within the desert, there is a forest, and within the forest, there is a desert; and so I have learned to see that a desert is not devoid of life, but simply inhabited by different forms thereof. I have remembered the sublimity of the wholeness, and it has moved me, and I have wept, and I have smiled, and I have rejoiced. I have seen the wholeness in the trees; in the waters; in the morning mists; in the summer sunshine; in the eyes of a stranger; in the steam rising from a cup of tea; in the words of a story; in the frames of a film. I have seen it in the low places, in the high places; in the sweetness of a meadow of flowers; in the stench of a sewer drain; in the fresh greens of a woodland, in the coarse, dull tones of a city street. I have seen it in life, in death; in jubilation, in suffering; in fortune, in misfortune; in hatred, in love. As I live, and as I pass through all of the days of my life, I glimpse it anew, in different places, in different spaces, in different faces, and it becomes evermore easier to sit, still, for a little while, and look, and open myself, and see it wherever I am, in whatever I wish: because it is everywhere, always, and it guides me back to myself. It brings me to remember; to re-accept; to reaffirm, vigilant of my own potential to forget. Time will tell if I am working against an interminable entropy, or whether matters stabilize themselves long-term.

I have the courage to be, and I try not to succumb to elongated spells of despair. I only sigh, and it's lost in the air; and when I do find myself in mourning, for that which never was or that which is or that which never will be, I know somewhere in my heart of hearts that my sorrow is part of the sublimity, even though this does not make it pleasant, nor does it make it pass. But it does, perhaps, make the vicissitudes of living a little bit easier; or, more difficult, but in a manner that further elucidates their beauty.

Whenever I touch for a moment — or a few moments — upon the sublimity of life and of living, it rarely alters my conception of a situation or reduce what I perceive as the need for change, in my own life or in the lives of a greater humanity. It doesn't change a thing, not in and of itself: but it does change how I see things. It reinforces my understanding of the need for compassion; for careful appreciation of complexity; for humble acknowledgement of the web-like nature of all things, inextricably connected in a pattern wherein all is interdependent, somehow, even as the pattern itself changes along with its stitches; and every stitch has many names, some "good", some "bad", some "objective", some "subjective", some "in-between", some "amoral", some sufficient, some insufficient; and by their insufficiency, sufficient, only in a different way.



All things together taken, my conception of sublimity of is one of radical acceptance, a recognition of the lightness of being: a lightness that carries its own sort of heaviness, and can be its own sort of burden to us all, and yet also its own sort of freedom. It is a lightness that leads me to feel what I imagine it must be like to float among the stars, and yet this feeling emerges from being grounded in awe of the Earth; of humanity; of the matter that makes up it all; and how it all came to be, and continues to become. It isn't that spirits live in the rocks and the trees and the houses and the hearths: it's that these things are made of matter, ever-connected, and this brings me to feel the materiality of my own spirit, the organic spirituality of my own materiality — and the potent meaningfulness that can be imbued within, and drawn out from, *all* materiality.

A fallen tree has no words to say nor any way to say them if ever they were so, and yet that same moss-draped log speaks to me in echoes: reflections of my own being, and of human being. Apophenia means only that the connections are not intended, not that they cannot sometimes be allowed to emerge, or be actively created, or happily shared.

There are moments when I like to think of the beginning of my life — my childhood — as an oft-painstaking journey up the mountain; to the rim, where I dangled my foot over the edge; and then, at last, a climb down the slope, out into the wider world and all that it offered to my freshened eyes: but, in truth, I have never left the lip of the crater. I am still staring out across the caldera at the mingled death and life of the blast zone, and I am always there. I'll never not be there. I will not ever depart: for the rest of my life, I will remember the view from the mountaintop. The sight disappears from constant view in my everyday life, but I know it is there, and I will be back there, again and again and again, to see the same wholeness reflected in every boulder and every breath, and I will always be trying to comprehend both the things that it is made of and how all of those things connect, distinct but not separate. I will always be in wonderment at the sublimity that I saw from my vantage point on the rim, and I will always be searching for that sublimity, trying to understand it, trying to see more fully how it emerges from, and yet is constituted by, the masses and messes of the material world. I know what I saw, and what I see, and the wholeness that is, and the wholeness that could be — if we shape it — and I weep. I weep because I see, and I see more, and yet less, with every lived-by day.

This knowledge forms the roots from which I draw breath. My happiness is the result of my labors, but my life and livelihood, in some significant manner, will always belong to Mount St. Helens. I am content with that.

The poet Li Bo, of Tang China and the many locales to which and through which and from which he traveled over the seventy years of his vagabond life, wrote a poem about meditating at the summit of Ching-t'ing Mountain:

*The birds have vanished down the sky.  
Now the last cloud drains away.*

*We sit together, the mountain and me,  
until only the mountain remains.*

I sit. One day, not merely in momentary mind but in matter, only the mountain will remain.